



## Moonlight Mile by Fadinggx

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**Summary:** Most of Hawkins is oblivious to the events from 3 years ago, though a few can still feel the ache from the mark left behind. They move on & keep their secrets while trying not to come apart at the seams. But just beneath the surface, she grows stronger, keeping the fragile barrier between both worlds intact. What will happen when someone offers her a chance to break free?

# 1. Gimme Shelter

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## Chapter One

### Gimme Shelter

*November 1986*

It's extraordinary – that in our darkest moments, things we could never expect come to bring us to the light. That when we think everything is done – over for good, a glimmer of hope throws us back to where we thought we could never be again.

Hawkins, Indiana was not a significant place for many. It was an okay location to bring a family up; houses were affordable, it was great to support the smaller businesses when the malls started to pop up. There were no noteworthy landmarks and sometimes no reason to pass through on a road trip unless you knew someone, and even then most of the people tried to get out while they could if they were born and bred in Hawkins. There was nothing screaming for the kids who turned into adults to do so – no backwards preachers who influenced a town to hate everybody different, a not very obvious class system when it came to wealth, and very little crime – if you discount the teenagers who grew tired of their little town and wanted to shake things up for the sake of rebellion – but they would always exist.

It was a sleepy little town to say the least. But that was just it. It was so unassuming that many barely glimpsed it on the map and wrote it off as just another suburbia haven.

That's why it was easy to plant the Department of Energy in a plot of forest land of Hawkins. That's why it was easy to cover up so much from the majority of the town. But when Will Byers came back alive after burying his lifelike body in a casket at a largely attended funeral – when infrequent church goer Moira Blithe witnessed a truck flip mid air over a bunch of preteens on bikes in front of her house – when a large stain of blood dried onto the pipe of a water fountain that had been missed in the clean up of Hawkins Middle School

appeared to the discomfort of an 8th grader who stopped to tie her shoelaces before Social Studies – when Troy Donovan was still healing a broken arm which was supposedly caused by some bald girl with telekinetic powers (no one believed that – despite his mother's utmost faith in her wayward son) – it no longer became easy to hide things of such magnitude within Hawkins, Indiana.

And while many still regarded Hawkins, Indiana as a peaceful, sleepy little nook nestled amongst rich forests, a few were weary after the events of a week in November, 1983. Even the slightest flicker of a light sent this lot on edge, some from pure fear of what could be lurking within their midst, and others desperately hopeful that something closer to their kind, a young girl with a shaved head would finally reappear after a well observed absence.

But after three years, the search grew tired, and depending on who you spoke to, the girl that had been very much present in the real world for a week of their lives was either dead or still missing. They tried to get on with their lives, but each and every one of them had their secrets, their own battles to fight, and their own troubles to mend.

Much like a teenager bored of watching things go by without much progress, the universe grew impatient. Or something had grown impatient with it. Either way, things needed to be shaken up – the end result was up to those who needed a thorough thrust back into the shoes of those who ran without certainty of success, hearts beating so fast they might explode when they stopped, eroding into a cloud of ash – to reopen the wounds they had sealed shut so that they could go on, numb as they would never wish to be, never truly healed. They needed to see their truths out in the open – they needed to be revealed for what they were and not who they pretended to be.

This universe was ready to hand back the reason for their pain, the reason for their numbing motion, the reason for their secrets and the reason for their betrayals. The reason to feel all the human condition had to offer. It was ready to bring resolution even if it meant a whole lot of trouble first.

She was worn and weary, but she felt content when she saw him.

Joyce Byers never wanted to work in a store wearing a smock, but it's a hell of a lot less expensive than going back to school to get some qualifications other than her high school diploma and takes less time too when the bills need to be paid and her sons need to be fed, clothed, and educated. Not like their father would care to pay child support any time soon, even when the one in a million chance of their youngest being alive didn't spring Lonnie into becoming a more active caregiver.

But as she sees him, waiting by his Chevy truck plastered in the Hawkins Police Department logo, her annoyance of an ex-husband long gone to his obnoxiously selfish ways has faded to nothing.

So many people either greet him or avoid him at all costs, their town's Chief of Police. He seems happier by the latter more than the former civilians.

She is happy. That he's there – part of the bigger picture that makes her overall pleased – even if he hasn't tried anything yet, although the irony was not lost on Joyce.

Jim Hopper, the Chief of Police in Hawkins, a notorious drunk and quite promiscuous if rumours were to be true, had held down the reins when things got bad, drinking very little these days and having not bothered to sate the need all adults eventually came to with the desired sex. He helped save her son, resuscitated him and brought him back from the nether – or the Upside Down as the kids had coined it from their explanation from Mr. Clarke. She would be forever grateful for that. And he didn't need to hang around. But he wanted to, and she liked that.

Three years had gone by since the day she got her son back. Will had trusted Hopper far more than his own father, and though he'd never admit it, his mother saw it in his eyes. Hopper would pick him up from school or the Wheeler's often. He didn't force Will to like the things he'd liked and understood the boy's new fear of the dark was not trivial, stringing up some of the lights Joyce had purchased in her haste to communicate with her youngest in his room, fixing whatever bulbs were out, making sure they didn't flicker unnecessarily to cause

further upset. He never once dismissed her son's new neuroses and his occasional panic attacks. He always found what he believed was a good solution, tailored to her little boy.

Joyce felt pure warmth in her heart because of it; the acceptance that her son was sensitive and more inclined to a path covered in charcoal and emotion, just as Jonathan was a deep thinker to a fault, influenced heavily by his music and saw photography as his future. Jim accepted them for what they were, took pride in what they did, and didn't try to mould them in what he had idealised them to be as men. And he wasn't even theirs to claim. Not like that. Not even for her.

He held up a greasy brown paper bag and she knew he'd picked up burgers for the two of them, Will eating at the Wheeler's tonight – a ploy Joyce knew Karen Wheeler was behind because she thought it would push Hopper and she to have some more private time. The burgers were from Benny's old place. His friends decided to keep the place in his memory, as a shared business and had a team of part time cooks working, as well as waiters and waitresses who were likely students from Hawkins High School. It opened up opportunities they never thought possible, but as long as Benny's soul stayed at the centre, they knew it would always be a place with heart. It was one of the few good things that kept Hawkins business alive.

As she walks out to him, the breeze from the cold day made her skin icy and it hits her how heavy her eyes feel. She doesn't seem to be the only one to notice.

"Looks like you had a fun day," he comments with a small, understanding smile. She gives him one back, hardly saying a word when she gets in the car.

"Thanks for picking me up – the Pinto is taking longer than I expected."

"This time of year, everybody's vehicles are acting up. Then again with the condition yours was in, you might have to consider trading it in for something more durable."

"My car has always been sturdy no matter how cheap," says Joyce,

only slightly defensive. Truth was it had been an absolute bargain, but that was due to a recall of the car and model she had specifically. But for the last seven years it hadn't given her any trouble until now, which had been disappointing. And she didn't have the money to really consider upgrading her little hunk of junk.

Jim went quiet for a moment as she opened the door for herself and sat in the passenger seat. When he was seated and buckled up, revving the car to life, he had a cautious but considerate gaze about him, a face she could never read as negative or positive when it had flashed about over the few years she'd grown closer to him.

"You could always access that hush money."

Joyce's face fell and she immediately shook her head, vehemently.

Brenner and his agency men had given Joyce a lot of money to use to help compensate their family for what happened. It was the only guarantee to keep them quiet after everything and Will's declining condition afterward – recovery to this degree was never cheap and they had to compensate on that matter. She knew her son would never be as healthy as he once was, what with being in a toxic environment for almost an entire week, but without the money she feared he would've been far worse off. After Will's health was no longer an issue, she refused to touch it. Not when she thought of the little girl whom they were trying to strike a deal over when she tried to get her son from the gate.

It was seeing Terry Ives, knowing Eleven's story, meeting her personally and watching her bravely seek out her own child through a power not born to mankind all the while suffering for it – it pushed Joyce to the edge. Will was just as thin and maybe a hint more sick looking when he came back, but they almost looked the same in treatment. Joyce was a mother and had a penchant for human decency, who could see that Eleven was not considered a child or even a person worthy of rights, a concept that would've been left out of her learning all those years in the lab. She felt that the money was blood money when Eleven didn't get to come home with the boys. She never knew the full story, but they must have tracked her down somehow. It was enough to make her feel sick to even option the money into her financial plans after all that little girl went through.

"You know I can't Hop...I'd feel better just sending the money to charity – one that doesn't use exploitation as a method or *"tout patriotism to their morally corrupt causes"*."

Jim heavily sighed. He wished he hadn't gone on a drunken rant about the Department of Energy folk. He'd almost thrown himself under the bus for what happened.

"I couldn't sleep last night because of her."

Jim knew whom she was talking about. The "her" in question used to be his daughter Sarah – but it had moved on to the dilemma of the girl who had E.T. like abilities, and a similar understanding of the world being limited, and an enthralling but overall detestable upbringing. "Eleven" as called by Will's friends – El for short, had been a fascinating trail to follow leading up to the climax that found Will Byers in the Upside Down. But Hopper had to reason that she had been too far-gone, that she was too dangerous to be around Wheeler, Sinclair and Henderson to begin with. He wouldn't have been entirely comfortable with Will, his body and immune system taking its toll to restore him to full health – to be around what was an unstable experiment who knew nothing of the real world and its consequences. She could've accidentally snapped him like a twig.

"Will's in practical mourning because the twelfth's coming up soon," Joyce mentions aloud, her stream of thoughts over the past week that plagued her mind most coming out unhindered. "He didn't even know her – but when the boys kept looking for her, he obviously learned about her, and I can't help but think he would've understood her best."

Jim doesn't see the need to placate her. It's not what she's after right now. She just wants to let go of her concerns as she occasionally did. Jim didn't mind being the person she needed for this particular catharsis.

Joyce looks troubled and she rubs at her eyes, certain she's smudged the last remains of the drugstore makeup she bought to make herself more appealing to Hopper, not that she believed it pushed him to do something more forward, but it seems she is more concerned about it these days. But her thoughts are led back to the more consequential



efforts of a little girl's life.

"She's dead, isn't she Hop?"

Jim swallowed uncomfortably.

He pictured himself walking toward the box late last night after work, a small cargo of Eggos, actual food, water and toiletries. He'd also added a Dr. Seuss book as well as a Roald Dahl (as he was unsure of her capability), with a sense of levity for those who simply told him that helping her to survive was key once upon a time. A good children's book was probably not considered within scraping the bare minimum for survival.

Shoulders sagging, Jim opens his mouth and eventually closes it again.

He never answers her, which makes her think that he indeed does believe such a notion. She feels the swirling of discomfort in her stomach, guilt and despair mixing together to make her somewhat ill. In all these years, they rarely spoke of Eleven, of her possible whereabouts and her wellbeing. It was often a topic between them shortly after the events from three years ago, but when they saw the boys tirelessly looking, they figured they had their amount of Eleven to surmise without airing it out for the sake of rehashing reddened theories and adding hopes to the young boys dismal search.

And Will's hope had further extended Jim Hopper's guilt over his agreement with Brenner's men. The boy had been eager to see how the Hawkins Police Chief had gone about finding Eleven in the beginning before Joyce would push the subject back onto school and his friends. From his understanding, Will's friends were just beginning to cope with the idea that she might never come back. That his friend Michael Wheeler was starting to process the thought that she was dead and gone, a lot quieter since his pursuit had been arrested for the sake of his sanity. That Dustin Henderson's jokes became more forced, and his good times attitude was beginning to wear thin on his own faith that things would get better, that Lucas Sinclair was more determined than the whole lot of them put together when the doubts started to make more sense than the hope they relished in. But, whether it was from a sense of duty, paying his way forward by

trying to give it back, or outright guilt of having felt like a burden from the beginning, Will wouldn't give up on finding Eleven.

"You know...I'd like to think if I could do anything differently – it would be taking them away from that school and throwing away those Supercoms, you know, before we went to get Will."

The aching sigh from Jim reached peak as they came to a red light on an intersection in town.

"They would've chased her to the state line Joyce. Snapped her back into that lab and returned to testing."

No matter where they had gone, Hawkins National would have always found her that night.

"Maybe..." Joyce spoke croakily, but just as another thought occurred, she sat back up. "Or maybe she would've survived. Got out while she could."

"It's not really worth pondering over – especially if we believe the inevitable."

His heart sunk deeply when he said those words. The truth would probably never see the light of day. But lying while those close to him still spoke with a smidgen of hope made his throat constrict and added another wrinkle to what was a quickly ageing face.

"Can't help it sometimes Hop. It's sadistic, but I do it because otherwise I..."

And she had become surprisingly quiet in her machinations, but when her heart pained with the harsh spotlight that shone upon her potential selfishness over only her son's wellbeing.

Hopper understood her train of thought all without her saying so. She would have done anything to get her son back – even if the vultures picked at Eleven. Joyce never did give her up, something he couldn't quite understand considering what had been on the table at the very tense time.

But she *has* to hope that the girl lives, because otherwise the guilt

could make her perish thanks to what could be considered a self-absorbed need for her son to live.

"You didn't give her up Joyce - there's no reason for you to feel the way you do."

"She helped us find him, and in return she was sent straight to hell."

"We don't know that for certain."

Joyce turned to him with her eyes narrowed. "Death, the Upside Down, or back to the Lab. Either way Jim, she did what we couldn't - what they wouldn't do for us, and she never saw her happy ending."

"Not every kid gets a happy ending to their childhood," an assiduously poignant Jim spoke quietly. He didn't really want to hear what else there was to say on the subject. The four boys had been beating a dead horse for three years; he didn't want Joyce to pick up where they'd recently left off.

Briefly her eyes shut in regret. "I'm sorry Jim."

And her hand lands on his at the stick as he has gone down a gear. He's unable to move, his affection for her wanting to flip his hand so she can clasp hers within his fit. Without the secrets, he would've done this a long, long time ago. But they're still there, the late night visits and drop off to the box, the occasional consultation to get him to keep going without fail, it freezes him from enjoying the possibilities that lie between them.

She clutches the top of his hand for a moment or two before retracting it, his hand relaxing on the stick once more. Joyce recoils at the loneliness she's beginning to feel in this friendship.

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*"I feel a hunger, it's a hunger,  
That tries to keep a man awake at night,  
Are you the answer I shouldn't wonder,  
When I feel you whet my appetite."*

*"With all the power you're releasing,  
It isn't safe to walk the city streets alone,*

*Anticipation's running through me,  
Let's find the key and turn this engine on."*

*"I can feel you breathe,  
I can feel your heart beat faster."*

*"Take me home tonight  
I don't want to let you go till you see the light  
Take me –"*

"Dustin turn that shit off, I can't think."

They were inside the Wheeler basement when this uncharacteristic display occurred. Mike Wheeler hadn't been one to get agitated easily, not if you compared him to his three friends that is.

Maybe it was the fact that they were studying for the only class they all shared together that was also an honours class, Chemistry – a big test was coming up in a week and they knew the closer to the weekend would be well shot of their concentration. The 12th of November never gave them any true peace, Mike particularly suffering on the day (and considerably those leading up to it) as the others tiptoed around the constant reminder, their own mourning dealt with less hotly than the burning pit of anguish that hollowed lanky teen was well known for this time of year.

Dustin swapped a look with Lucas who sat next to Mike on the couch with his much cleaner textbook open to the page he was revising silently. Lucas pointedly shook his head, assuaging the urge for his curly headed friend to puncture the wound that was clearly opening up by itself over time. He wouldn't have been insensitive; Lucas knew it was Dustin's charm that sometimes got them through these quiet and unproductively reflective sessions in Mike's basement. But they really didn't have the time to get into it all, especially when they set aside practically three days to do absolutely nothing because of how time-consuming mourning had become to them over the years.

Eventually that year's overplayed hit on the radio that past summer was turned off rather bluntly as Dustin was closest. The two hadn't failed to notice that Will had barely looked up from his doodling his textbook, completely lost in his own world.

They got him back from the Upside Down – but he was never truly the same. He had always been shy and a little quiet, but that was in front of other people. With them, he was all smiles and encouragement – with a sprinkling of preteen energy. Dustin had always insisted that a group of friends needed a Will, someone who everyone got along with and was above and beyond the kindest person they'd ever know – their Will.

Sure, Mike could be that way – but he got caught up in other things, like sulking and taking the lead, occasionally being stubborn in the paths he forged. It was a different way of kindness, it was a protective kindness that came in bouts from Mike, especially when it came to moments of distress that involved those dearest to him. Dustin's MO was more about keeping the group in check, and was probably the most likely to get real with his friends on everything, particularly the things that made them tense. Lucas – well, he wasn't easily trusting, but it was a trait that was necessary to a group of picked on kids who had a penchant for all things nerdy. But when he knew the truth, when he understood a person inside and out – all flaws and strengths combined, he was welcoming of them – if their heart was in the right place that is.

And while they remained relatively the same after the ordeal of November 83', Will had grown a little quieter around them, the way he would when he was in front of others who made him feel less. It had put them on edge, but they knew it had something to do with his time in the Upside Down. They hoped his eternal kindness would return one day – they couldn't really blame him for being self-absorbed but it was starting to get to them, where his thoughts might be taking him.

Without getting too caught up now, Dustin and Lucas simultaneously sighed and shrugged, getting back to their Chemistry revision and hoping above all hopes that they would get through the next few years without too much mental trauma.

It would seem that asking less of the universe had pushed it more.

"Boys, dinner's ready!"

Mike slammed his pencil down from his mouth where he had been

hacking at the wood with his teeth. Lucas grimaced at the sight and tried to remain collected when Mike finally registered other people were in the room were with him again. Sheepish, with a tinge of pink smattering his elegant cheekbones, he muttered out an apology.

"Too full from that 2B, Mike?"

Mike half-glared at Dustin who barely smirked in return, Lucas chuckling and Will, well, finally remembering he wasn't somewhere else entirely, waking up to his surroundings.

"Smells like chicken tonight," Will briefly spoke.

Mike took a sniff of the air and was pleasantly smacked with the aroma of his mother's cooking wafting down into the basement. He half expected her to be fanning the smell through the gap in the closed door to get them to come quicker.

"Probably because it is, all breaded up and soaked in the best kind of fat."

"Fat that you still don't have," Lucas jested, pinching his skinny arm.

Mike hardly refrained from rolling his eyes as his friends all picked themselves up from their spots. He lingered a moment, the leader of the group who checked on all his friends, only to glance at the blanket fort in the corner as he had done for years, only to feel the disappointment spike internally.

She would never be there.

Some cruel trick his mind would play on him had convinced him to always check that one place before leaving the basement when ticking off his three closest friends.

Maybe Dustin had been right those two summers gone. Mike was prolonging it – only to suffer when dates like the 12th of November came crawling back into their nightmares. The inevitable truth smacked him in the face when Lucas and Dustin intervened his efforts with the search when they saw what it was doing to both Mike and Will.

Will had never given up deep down, but Mike knew he couldn't kid himself anymore. They couldn't hear her on the supercoms when they started, a huge lead when Will mentioned that he didn't have it on his person when Chief Hopper and Mrs. Byers brought him back, so she could have potentially found it and tried using it to communicate with them. Will's guilt was too strong to even consider giving up on her. But for Mike, it was a matter of a depression that had begun to sink in the summer after the November week spent with their new friend while trying to find Will.

The blanket fort remained for reasons Dustin and Lucas never quite believed, but decided not to argue it after the first time. It was Mike's tribute to her, hidden in plain sight for those who never knew of her existence, but a shadow still remained for the three boys who got to know her, bathed in the warm yellow of a flashlight shone through a bed sheet sheltering her through the connection of two old dining chairs.

"Mike?"

Mike inhaled quickly and turned to see Will waiting on the last step, the freckled young man coming out of a small trance that he found himself sinking into.

"Yeah, sorry, just...found myself falling again."

"The twelfth?"

Mike didn't need to respond for him to confirm his thoughts.

After a short stretch, Mike slumps his way toward the staircase, making his way up after Will.

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"Hey man, are we out of milk again?"

"You left it on the bench Gordon, I had to throw it out."

The black, curly haired drama student brushed it off. "I'll pick some up after my shift, Pepperoni without olives?"

"Yeah that would be great man!"

The door shuts to the small two-bedroom apartment, harder to come by in New York City without starving oneself and paying student fees. Jonathan blesses whatever God came by and gave his life some slack by plotting that NYU Board of Trustees member in his high school when his Junior and Senior shots were on display, and that they'd turned out better than he had ever believed in personal opinion. Without that full paid scholarship, NYU would have been a pipe dream.

Although it was strange to admit that his brother's disappearance and eventual return had inspired his work that had him receive any sort of attention from someone with pull in the arts community and at NYU within the Arts Department, Jonathan had left behind the guilt of his surprising success back when he first received the scholarship. Will knew what was behind some of Jonathan's darker shots, and while Jonathan figured he would never want any sort of reminder, his younger brother took an optimistic look at this way of expressing himself.

*"Some good can come of suffering."*

That week in November in '83 had certainly shaped their lives very differently, even after Will returned. His brother was still in many ways suffering from his ordeal, but Jonathan knew that he was being looked out for, and when his mother was too busy, his friends certainly promised to do so when Jonathan left for college.

And Jonathan had his own demons to fend off whenever things took a creepy turn in his surroundings. A flickering light in his apartment, the immediacy that occurred when Gordon cut himself cooking and drew blood, the chill that ran through his bones when his mind felt just a touch too out of control late at night.

Nancy was his go to person to call. And she had had fewer incidents over these last few years, but she never teased him for his fears. They'd both seen what could exist in the world. They had both fought it, only to be pushed back – never entirely rewarded for their efforts.

Well, Will came back. But fighting a Demogorgon didn't do that. That girl, his mother and the Chief of Police did that.



It didn't bring Barb back. She was long gone from the mortal world through Eleven's findings.

Jonathan knew Nancy held onto that guilt. That it ate her up until one night she burst. He half expected she would use Steve as an outlet – in a manner that he wished not to think about, but she found that continuing things with him only made the wound remain wide open. He could understand why. It was his pool, his house where Barb was taken. Nancy was a mature young woman with a more, bluntly logical outlook after the events took place. Romanticising a future with Steve escaped her thoughts not long after Barb died, and she couldn't go back to Steve's house ever again if all she did was remember the worst of it.

Instead, Nancy had come to his house, surprising not only him, but his very concerned mother, who wisely said nothing more on the subject because she knew in some ways that Jonathan wasn't comfortable with thinking too deeply about it himself, let alone discussing it with his mother.

They never kissed, they never initiated any sort of courtship – as lame as that sounded. They were an odd twosome, but it was hardly out of order after that week in November.

She was broken, entirely. Nancy was trying to stay strong because she realised her brother was going through something similar. Barb was capable, and Eleven was scarily powerful, but the younger girl's newfound freedom seemed all that heartbreaking while Barb's injustice was incredibly bittersweet. The mourning for Barb hadn't been secret after she'd been declared dead once and for all. Nancy was able to cry at the memorial. Nancy was able to remember her publicly. Mike wasn't really given that opportunity once the boys had given up on trying to find their companion. His mourning had to be hidden for the sake of getting on, and because overall, Eleven had been a magnificent secret of a covert government operation. They were risking their lives and their sanity to mourn the super powered girl with the buzz-cut.

Nancy's immense remorse had been collecting, because she felt it wasn't fair on Mike for her to express it, that she had to be resilient for his sake. And her resolve came crumbling in Jonathan's embrace

that night. That petite teenage girl had given up for a night.

And so Jonathan, having outgrown his masculinity complex from his father, and also shedding the shame that came with being a photographer sleuth and Nancy knowing the truth, was able to be completely open with her.

Selfishly, he was glad she had been by his side during that week, fighting off a monster that dragged his brother to another dimension. Jonathan was glad he wouldn't know what it felt like to be entirely alone – being both protector and a coward without someone to empathise would have surely been hellish to face when coming up to bat when the walls started expanding and the Christmas lights hung from the ceiling began to flicker.

Nancy had been valiant that last night in his house – because she was angry, angry at how little was being done for Barb, how everyone was treating her for being with Steve, Steve's next inflammatory actions, everything was building up for her and size meant nothing when she was head to toe pure fury. It fed her need to beat something otherworldly.

Jonathan was so very afraid, but he knew he needed to stamp it out, because Will was barely alive – and his mother needed a chance to grab him without being hounded by the creature – and regardless of his heart pounding at the thought, he was stepping up to be a distraction without hesitation.

But her breaking that night reminded him how much support was necessary. And her choosing him over her younger brother meant she was still willing to hide this side of her emotions from the equally broken twelve year old. He had understood this, Jonathan had to be Will's literal lean on straight out of the Upside Down and recovering at home. He needed to be that bit stronger, because he wanted Will to feel safe always.

He wanted him to be naïve for just a little while longer before he had to face the world the way all kids eventually have to.

Not being in Hawkins made it that much harder now, but they both knew he needed this, and college in New York City was a once in a

lifetime opportunity.

Will had to be thanked for so much, and Jonathan only hoped to be as available as he could be to his little brother, if only for some comfort, some compensation for that week in November.

He picked up the phone that sat on the kitchen bench and started dialling through to his old home number. Jonathan wasn't sure if anyone would be home, his family had never followed a conventional routine at night. His brother could be at the Wheelers; the family became even more protective over Will and Karen Wheeler insisted that when his mother worked he come over as often as possible, Mike benefitting from not stewing too deeply over his own issues with Will around. His mother was most likely at work. Maybe so she could have the day off for Friday to be with Will at his most vulnerable, she would work extra hours in the week instead. Jonathan could never be certain.

"Hello."

"Mom, it's me, Jonathan."

"Oh hey Sweetie! How's everything going up there?"

"It's great Mom, really. Still a little chaotic and it's starting to feel a little bit like home now – but it will never be Hawkins."

"We do miss you Jon, and you've inspired Will to get a little more serious now that he wants to go in the same direction."

"He made a decision about New York then? Because if he gets into a college here I could stay a little longer, get some work, room with him."

"I imagine college is a time when people want to be away from their family honey, spread their wings and all that, just like you're doing." She isn't berating him, his mother sounds almost amused at his concern and readiness.

"Yeah but, it's an option, you know."

His mother sighs on the other end of the line. "You remembered, didn't

*you?"*

His chuckle sounds through to his mother, and it's probably the most sure thing he's felt in this conversation. That week in November three years prior would haunt a select few of Hawkins for as long as memory would allow it.

"How could I forget?"

*"You want to talk to him? He got back from the Wheelers ten minutes ago."*

Jonathan didn't often hit the mark right, but that was some pretty decent timing. "If you wouldn't mind Mom?"

*"Course not. He's not too bad now. Just try and keep his spirits up, okay?"*

"I know Mom."

A muffled yell has him retracting the receiver away from his ear slightly until he hears a light pounding on the other end and a voice that sounds familiar.

*"Jonathan?"*

"Jesus, that's not Will."

*"Shut up – my voice hasn't dropped that much."*

"I don't know man, am I on the phone to a high school senior or my pipsqueak brother?"

*"Jonathan,"* his voice is a pleading groan now, far different to the excitement that couldn't be hidden when he first started speaking.

"Alright, alright. I hear you're taking your sketching seriously?"

*"Mom's filled you in on everything, what's the point in us having this conversation?"*

There's a slight pause from Jonathan as he says with more sincerity than he began, "New York would be good for you Will. People don't

condescend artists here. They encourage them...sometimes to a fault."

*"Kind of why I'm aiming for New York, Jonathon. Don't imagine many people are going to see much value on any of my sketches in Indiana unless they're Mom or Hopper."*

"Yeah, so I didn't bring it up but –"

*"Nothing new has happened Jonathan, they're still tiptoeing around each other, it's worse than you and Nancy, I swear."*

"Hey, we don't tiptoe. We're friends. That's it."

*"Sure. They had dinner together tonight, although it was Benny's, nothing too suggestive – yes we're talking about you – you talk about me and I'm fine with it!"*

Jonathan realised that the murmuring had to be his mom protesting their chosen topic, not realising that her eldest was taking the longest route to get to the point of his call. His little brother sounded teasing at most. Mean spiritedness didn't resonate in Will Byers.

*"Apparently Hopper's off limits – unless he's part of a recount of my day – so all I can say is he picked me up from Mike's, and I'm sure it didn't earn him any brownie points."*

Jonathan snorts unexpectedly at this and his Mom objects a little louder, but Jonathan recognises her tone; playful, not disciplinary.

Once she leaves the room, the older brother senses it, because Will wasn't ever stupid despite what his softness suggested to some.

*"I guess you want to offer me a reprieve from the anniversary of the week from hell?"*

It's Jonathan's turn to give a drawn out sigh. "How are you doing Will?"

Just like clockworks, his brother's voice becomes the epitome of shrivelled.

*"It's not...bad...during the day. I think that's when Mom feels shit. You know, because of what she went through. Same for you...and Mike's moody as hell during the day too...and as long as I don't accidentally cut myself on anything in the art room – I'm sweet."*

"And at night?" Jonathan asks hesitantly.

*"The same as every other night. Lights on, but even then I can't really sleep. Dustin suggested sleeping pills – but I don't like that idea...I'd have no control."*

"Neither do I, even if it meant you got a full night sleep."

Will is holding something back – maybe he's not ready to delve too deeply into the world he hides from at night, but Jonathan doesn't care, as long as he knows he's always on the line, listening. They all saw the hell that was wrought from the Upside Down. No matter how much time passes, they would always be on edge.

"Maybe you can get a nap in at school, during Gym just to make the day even better. Nurse Gregson always liked me, I can put in a good word for you."

Will laughs lightly on the other end, *"The new convenience store started selling these weird caffeinated pick me up type meds. Lucas gave me one and it seemed to get me through the day but I think I'm getting heart palpitations from the stuff."*

"You were never good with coffee, what makes you think some fad pill would make it any better?"

*"I know, I know, but it was a worth a shot. I might try that nap tomorrow and see how bad Friday is."*

Friday would be the worst day of them all. And it wasn't just the anxiety of the memory, it was a genuinely valid fear of whether these otherworldly things would return to wreak havoc on any one who had the worst luck to expel blood that day. As long as his brother wasn't alone on the Friday, Jonathan would feel a lot less concerned.

"You got the mix tape I sent a couple of weeks ago, right?"

*"Yeah I kind of use it to drown out Lucas and Dustin arguing now that the Cimarron became a thing as of last Halloween."*

"Isn't it Lucas' car?"

*"I get front seat privileges some days, and Mike doesn't know what he's doing with music unless he's setting a mood for D&D. More upbeat than usual though, any reason?"*

"No reason, just thought that collection was right together."

*"The guys liked it either way. Dustin thought you were in love when you were making it – which is a little far fetched, but I wanted to check."*

The tape was made with Nancy in mind as well, and Jonathan sent a copy to her, even if she was half an hour away at Columbia and he could have delivered it himself. Occasionally Jonathan just liked sending her these as way of a two-item care package, a mix tape and letter with hard-boiled sucking candy in it.

"Dustin has no idea what he's talking about."

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The small stockpile of lights gathered around Will's room that shone through his room during the night didn't cause him to wake very suddenly. He'd actually managed to settle into a somewhat restful sleep when his dream was taking a very steep turn to nightmare memory lane. And it triggered something he utterly despised to rise up inside his internal organs.

There wasn't any time to reach the bathroom, and he knew if he was too loud his mom would come in and he wasn't sure if his secret was best revealed three years later in the middle of the night. Luckily a bucket resided under his bed for sick days, a common occurrence during the year after he returned from the Upside Down, and he wrapped a blanket, his now dead grandmother stitched for him when he was a young child, around his head and the bucket. Muffling the sound as best as he could, he hacked up the biggest slug he'd seen yet.

Whatever was growing in his system, and being vomited up at a rate

of once every few months was a result of his very short trip to the Upside Down. According to the once awful conversation he had with his mom about how she'd managed to pluck him straight from the Upside Down herself, a living hose creature of some sort had been stuck down his throat and it would have effectively and slowly killed him had it not be pulled carefully from him and had he not been attended by medical professionals immediately after coming to the normal world again.

He'd been operated on, but Will supposed that not everything could be screened, especially things that couldn't be understood without extensive research and testing.

A lot of what held Will back from being upfront about this secret condition was that he heard of Eleven's life, essentially as government property – and his mother's distrust of the Department of Energy felt like gut intuition more than paranoia. He may never see his family again if he asked the same people who placed his very lifelike fake body in the Quarry to help him.

And from what he'd seen in the distance that the guys had been adamant to keep those few times they'd been by, even with Mike's determination, the building Eleven had once grown up in, that they learned to remain apprehensive with, had been abandoned. Afterwards Will would discover this to be wholly true when Mike would admit that he dragged Lucas to break in one Summer night to investigate just how abandoned it actually was – only to discover that the old entry to the Upside Down, the way in which Will exited in the arms of Chief Hopper, was impossibly sealed up.

It was both good and unfair. There was no longer a possibility for any other kids to go missing through that terrifying avenue, even if it cost the girl who helped his Mom find him in the Upside Down. The government was no longer culpable and wouldn't pull the same abhorrent scheme with another family. However if Eleven had lived, and had somehow been transported to another dimension, likely the Upside Down, then she could have found a way back without generating too much of her power to get there and would have lived a normal life if they could get away with it. Or so he theorised.

So he kept his condition secret, because it hadn't felt like it was



killing him yet.

While that logic wasn't infallible, his fear had made him think quite irrationally.

A cold gust of air washed over him, but it wasn't remotely refreshing. And a smell that caused him to gag naturally from memory had him very aware of his surroundings after being stuck in a loop of exposition style thoughts.

Dilapidated and damp was the atmosphere that took over his room in the Upside Down, but it was better than being outside in the Upside Down. Moist air was filling his lungs and he knew he just had to remain quiet and still until he returned to his body in the normal world. He was only a reflection of himself in the Upside Down, a section – never totally complete, and it was this thinking that got him through returning to the Upside Down during a coughing episode. It never lasted long, even if the periods were extended to a couple of minutes now rather than the few seconds when he was twelve.

Will would have remained in routine had he been alone.

Alas, to his utter dismay, he wasn't.

A shuffling behind him, as he sat heaved over a broken bucket covered in mould caused him to flinch away in fright, only to feel something lying in his bed. In the Upside Down.

He jumped away, scrambling away on his backside hitting the wall shortly after. It would all be over soon, he had to remain collected so he could get back without possibly dying.

The body in his Upside Down bed was awake and he could sense it because the urge to run was very distinctive in his stomach, a tight mess in that very moment. But it was significantly smaller than most of the bloodthirsty creatures of the Upside Down. And he didn't really picture the creatures that existed in a cold science fiction hell to curl up under a blanket for any considerable warmth and to rest in such a way.

Another movement caused Will to react. He was on his feet and ready

to grab any implement that might keep this creature away just for a while, just until he could get back.

"Don't!"

It was a harsh, desperate whisper into the night. It was filtered, through some sort of device. What crossed his mind, with a bitter taste of hindsight, was that he should have clipped some sort of mini flashlight to his person so that he could at least see what he'd need to fight.

But Will stopped fretting as much as he was when he realised that this wasn't a creature.

A light eventually shone through some material on the bed and he was on display for what he knew now was a person.

"Who are you?"

The question was slightly stunted while also being assertive.

"Who are *you*?" he responded in shock.

"You...answer."

Will swallowed uncomfortably, shaking and trying to slow his breathing.

"My name is W-Will, Will Byers –"

"Will."

The voice sounded less threatening and a lot more clear too. The body it belonged to started moving from the bed. Will forced himself further into the wall despite meeting resistance from the foundation. He knew deep down that he wasn't a fighter and it was possible he was meeting death while being totally anxiety ridden.

And then the light tipped, to reveal a flashlight, wrapped in a thin shirt and faced the person Will was yet to see until they were entirely visible albeit with some eerie shadowing around the curves of their face, the light stopping where a button nose curved outward of the

face. More was beginning to reveal itself as the flashlight moved itself facing up on the floor between them, the power muted somewhat by the dirty white t-shirt's covering.

Long, tangled and rundown brown hair cascaded around a young face, with which brown eyes bore into his blue. It was a girl, around his height, maybe an inch shorter or taller, he couldn't be sure. But she looked somewhat overwhelmed.

The penny dropped when the static air and musty atmosphere no longer seemed to put Will on edge – and when the girl's breathing picked up in some strange sort of recognition, the reluctant visitor was certain.

"Eleven?"

"Yes."

"Holy shit."

The wheezing took over soon enough as he felt himself start to cough again, doubling over from the constriction he was undergoing. The flashlight was knocked over now that Eleven with her amazing abilities was no longer concentrating when processing this moment.

Will was startled as she bent down to help him. Her cool touch ignited something that he hadn't ever felt until it was no longer present.

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*Author's Note:*

*I started this over on AO3 but I figured it wouldn't hurt to upload it here too.*

## 2. Under Pressure

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### Chapter Two

#### Under Pressure

The air was warmer, the acidic smell wasn't as strong and eventually it disappeared from his sensory memory altogether. When he no longer felt Eleven's hand on his arm – he knew something was different.

The fervour within unleashed when he realised he was back home, in his own room, with no acquaintance in sight. He almost pulled his hair out in fury.

"No...No – no – no – no – no...NO!"

He pounded a fist against his bed, growing frustration breeding something ugly yet all too reminiscent to Will. He'd suppressed it a long time ago – in regards to his feelings for the girl he'd never met. After all it was almost inherent to blame himself over the small things in his life, but this felt far too close for him not to have done something – not to at least have tried something.

Footsteps echo out from near his mom's room. Now he'd done it.

Soon enough, they reach the door to his room and she flings it open without so much as a knock.

The utter relief spelled in her eyes says it all.

Even adults can fear the worst – but his mom collects herself, readying herself to console him as she bends down to him on the floor. Will can't bring himself to fall into the same patterns tonight.

He's trying to hide that life-sucking leech he threw up a few minutes ago in his slipper beside the bed, before he turned up in the Upside Down.

"Will, what happened?"

"It was just a nightmare Mom. I'm okay I swear."

His mom remains patient and willing by his side. Will sighs and urges her to go back to bed.

"Honestly I'm fine. It's happened now so I should be okay for the rest of the night."

Joyce is dejected to say the least, but knows when she's in a losing battle and decides that pushing it may only force her son into a corner that she never wants him to be in again.

"If you're sure sweetie."

She hugs him close and he eagerly responds so she doesn't suspect anything worth investigating herself. He knows just how to top it off too.

"I love you Mom."

"You too Will."

Slowly she leaves him as he sits on the bed and waves her awkwardly out. Once the door clicks shut, the relief washes over Will, falling back to lie down incorrectly, staring up at the ceiling, pondering his predicament.

A few moments later, he sits up in disappointment. Looking over at his alarm clock, the bright red numbers read 4:32 AM.

Will won't go back to sleep after that revelation, and his heart is pounding as he glares at his slipper. He's going to actually enjoy killing one of these things for once.

And it pushes him back to why he issued such resentment in the first place.

She's alive and somehow fighting fit, *in the Upside Down*.

He wished he got a better look at her but then he just had to start

coughing up. Her face is certainly etched into his memory.

His body expands when it becomes clear as to how he'll pass the time.

Will picked up the slipper and placed it on his bed. He had to keep an eye on it no matter how focused he became on his sketchbook.

He tended to use a large pad so he had the freedom to work with as much space as he could, but knows he would probably start writing next to her picture as a way of getting everything he needed down on paper. Too many people had come across his pad and never once hesitated to go through it without permission. People treated journals and books differently, especially when there was writing in it. People respected the privacy of books, pads were way too open to put aside and leave alone.

That was how his friends had been with his work from experience anyway.

And he couldn't have them coming across this information...yet. Will could have been hallucinating – he'd never actually seen a picture of Eleven, so he couldn't be sure if it was actually her or how he'd pictured her from a vivid description that guys had given when Mike wasn't around.

So as he drew from memory, her facial features were edited with an eraser from time to time, the natural light from the sun was starting to come up, condensing those few hours left to reveal the sun rising up.

By the time his mom came knocking to check on him again and to get him up for school, the slug thing had tried to leave his slipper eight times, he had a definitive sketch of Eleven's face and hair, as well as some side notes to the encounter in which he allegedly met her.

Her button nose was accentuated by the shadows that her small flashlight created in the dark of the Upside Down, and her eyes, a deep brown colour that somehow expressed a thousand unsaid words waiting to burst. Her bone structure shaped her face to be effortlessly elegant. Years of exposure to the Upside Down had made her skin

different, tinged sickly almost – but he could tell she had an olive tone to her complexion even with the damage done to it from the Upside Down atmosphere.

That is, if this was Eleven.

While the creatures of the Upside Down were probably not powerful or sentient enough to adopt sly tactics like that of shape shifting, Will didn't think it wise to rule out the possibility.

Though it was undeniable, the sensation akin to his mother's gut intuition.

Will knew no monster could convey so much all at once. The girl he'd met knew him, even if only through others and while checking on him when he was first stuck. Her silent euphoria of meeting anyone who was like her and meant no harm – who could contribute as little intelligent conversation as saying her name in shock and shortly after cursing as a result, and someone she knew as well, must have been indescribable after so long in isolation – in such an unhealthy and disturbing environment.

Will was the only one not to give up on her completely after everyone believed the likely situation. Maybe he was finally being granted some confirmation so that he could cling onto his faith in Eleven's living status with validity. Will closed his eyes briefly – and stopped seeing his missed opportunity and turned it around to be more optimistic. An opportunity to gather all he knew from that event.

Eleven was still alive. She aged and grew with them – she wasn't some morbid image Will's guilt complex had fabricated to showcase his remorse for his helper. Maybe he could see her again – and help her get out while he was at it.

Hope for Will Byers, had been renewed with a vigour he hadn't felt since he returned from the Upside Down.

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"Every morning I drive out of my way to pick you two up and you can't even stay awake to talk to me."

Dustin sent Lucas the finger and Will doesn't even respond. He's fast asleep, clutching a sketchbook like a teddy bear to his chest; his bag is stuffed at his feet, behind the passenger seat.

Mike raises a brow to Lucas, who sighs in return over dramatically for effect. "Ungrateful, that's what you all are."

Mike snorts, trying to get his longer limbs settled in Lucas' Cimarron. He's grown used to his mother's station wagon. Despite it lacking in "cool", it never depleted in comfort when he grew longer – though sadly, not broader.

Dustin cleared his throat before making a suggestion.

"If you don't mind dropping me off to the diner so I can miss homeroom that would be sick."

"Why would you miss homeroom? You actually like homeroom," Mike argued.

"Yeah well," Dustin groaned tiredly, stretching his arms out with a satisfying look on his face, only to return to one of displeasure, "Donovan figured out that Cassidy Fox also likes attending homeroom and I'm not in the mood to be his punching bag so he can show off to the only girl who doesn't know me as Toothless Henderson."

"I forgot to eat this morning too."

Lucas shook his head at his supposedly sleeping buddy Will in the rear view mirror.

"You're too good at playing possum Will. So what, we're just going to skip homeroom?"

"It's not like missing one homeroom is going to tarnish our records," Dustin declared, "Besides,

Will hasn't eaten – Mike probably had the full Wheeler special so we'll just discount his part in this equation-"

"We ran out of coffee this morning – I could use one of those –"



"Now Mike is part of the equation," Dustin proudly asserted.

"Only because it's in your favour," Lucas disputed half-heartedly.

"I'll tell Mrs. Robins I was late this morning so you don't lose your spot in her very ruthless hierarchy of favourites," Will spoke up again. Mrs. Robins had been heading to the convent to be a nun only to see herself teaching Trig and becoming one of the many homeroom teachers of Hawkins High. Will didn't make much of an appearance in her list, although he wasn't disruptive and he was polite so she never held him with ill regard either. Lucas was her favourite due to his interesting concern for religious faith while being quite scientifically conscious.

Hanging out with a bunch of nerds and geeks surprisingly didn't help his cause.

"If we must rebel – fine."

Lucas instead turned left, heading toward Benny's Diner instead of right toward Hawkins High and Dustin was genuinely amazed that his justification worked on one of his most stubborn friends. But then he finally absorbed what Lucas said.

"If this is rebelling then we're a bunch of Joanies."

Will awoke fully at hearing this and Mike turned in the passenger seat to look at Dustin in the back. Even Lucas was visibly taken aback by the expression. What would have capped it all off was Lucas hitting the brakes too hard for all the drama, but Lucas was a very cautious driver in everyday traffic.

"What?"

"You'll be a certified *Joanie* if you ever use that term again."

While Will was clearly exhausted from God knows what, he didn't fail to deliver in regards to what Dustin's friends all thought. Lucas burst out laughing and Mike followed with no lack of enthusiasm shockingly.

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Will had his head stuck in his sketchbook when his food arrived, a plate of eggs, bacon, French toast with berries covered in syrup. His stomach growled greedily at the sight. Most mornings were rushed these days and he hadn't had the same taste for breakfast unless it had been a Saturday morning with his mom or brother. School mornings tended to be quite queasy moments for Will, but having given himself the time to adjust and go slowly, he was quite ready to fill up for the day ahead.

Mike was nursing a coffee with cream and Dustin had a very specific favourite in Benny's classic waffles that all he had to say was "the usual" and even the new servers knew what he was talking about.

Lucas was picking at a bowl of fruit uneasily. "Was this really a good idea?"

"It's one time Lucas," Mike reassured tiredly, with Dustin jumping in before tucking in to breakfast, "If you haven't noticed, I'm doing us all a favour."

"How?" Lucas gestured somewhat.

"Will looks like something out of Dawn of the Dead and Mike isn't far behind. I'm doing a civic duty for these two fine citizens of Hawkins."

Lucas chewed on a piece of pineapple and carefully looked at both Mike and Will while slowly coming to much the same conclusion. "Okay, you have a point."

"I don't look like a zombie," insisted Mike firmly.

"I feel like one," Will quietly admitted with no reluctance for the term, slowly taking in his breakfast, though ever grateful. He straightened up a little when he catches sight of someone at the entrance from their four-person booth.

"Looks like Cassidy had the same idea."

Dustin reacts the most to this news, as he attempts to make himself less detectable once he catches her taking a seat at the diner bench alone. He came off violently inconspicuous but she never glances over at them.

She's often alone, which is peculiar for how much attention she garners from some of the most unlikely admirers such as a school bully that had yet to outgrow his detested middle school role.

Otherwise she is swept back into the background like everybody else in Hawkins.

Will seems to get back into his breakfast, welcoming the distraction upon his friends, fiddling with his sketchbook underneath the table on his lap. Mike and Lucas watch on curiously as their curly haired, broader friend is doing some odd things in order to remain cool.

"What's she reading?" Dustin asked, as he's suddenly interested in analysing Will's French Toast.

"20,000 Leagues Under the Sea," Lucas answers.

"So. Cool." The compliment comes out sounding more like a gripe.

Mike finally catches on to why he's reacting like this.

"You like her don't you?"

Dustin blanched and shrugged his shoulders; "Sure we'll call it a simple crush on the coolest girl ever in Hawkins. What of it?"

Lucas can't help but snicker. "You picked the most voluntarily unavailable girl in Hawkins to have a crush on? You of all people – you can't see that this is clearly an act, like she's perpetually living in a Brat Pack movie?"

Dustin readily defends the girl who might not know he exists.

"No one can keep that up for more than a year – this is born and bred cool."

Mike bites his lip, trying to hide the grin that threatens to break out on his face worse than Troy Donovan's acne over the last year. "20,000 Leagues is kind of lame based on what most people but us think man."

Lucas looked pleased to see his best friend contributing to what must

be the most unlikely revelation they would come across in a week that tended to plague them with nothing but lukewarm discomfort and suffering every year. He would drain this opportunity of all the juice it had.

"And she wears librarian style glasses to read too – why would you force yourself to be even more of an outsider unless you were just trying to prove a point?" Lucas pushed on.

"She didn't have a choice with the glasses actually. Her old ones broke just after she moved to

Hawkins and those were the only ones that had her prescription."

They all look at Will as he prompts them with this new information. He swallows a gratifying bit of egg and bacon that had been stabbed on his fork with precision.

"And she enjoys reading more because she hasn't connected properly with anyone here yet I think. That and she always has something hard to hit guys like Troy with if they approach her...I think she actually is a little bit odd."

As they look at each other questioningly, Lucas takes it upon himself to bring it up.

"How do you know that?"

"I was her partner for an English project last year. She liked the band T-shirt I was wearing – Jon's Rolling Stones shirt – and I started to find out some stuff through the couple of times we actually talked."

Dustin's mouth is hanging open quite a bit.

"You've never mentioned this before," Mike pointed out.

Will slowly shrugged and attested, "You guys never asked."

"Next time you secretly befriend the coolest girl-"

"Debatable-" Lucas interrupted.

"-Just tell us," Dustin said exasperated.

Will had his hands up in defence, "I will next time."

Admittedly, Will didn't think this was treasured knowledge, but then again he hadn't quite understood the hype around Cassidy. She was nice to him, so there was that and they both had similar tastes in music and arty brothers in New York – but the same factors that enamoured Dustin hadn't quite done the same things to him.

Will tried to never turn down that forbidden alley in his thoughts, but he had to consider that things weren't staying under wraps anymore. Only a few hours earlier he had actually come face to face with Eleven.

Everything seemed to be up for grabs now that the unusual on goings of the past were coming back to his reality.

---

After an interesting foray into disobedience by eating at Benny's instead of going to Homeroom, the boys drifted through their sophomore classes without a hiccup ahead.

Will had taken up his brother's advice and had a nap in Nurse Gregson's office on the sick bed. He looked worse for wear even after a fulfilling breakfast and surpassing Homeroom, but his growing resemblance and similar voice clearly got to the Nurse who appreciated his brother more than he originally understood.

Turned out some framed artsy outdoor black and white shots in Gregson's poor excuse of an office came from Jonathon's summer before Junior year, when he had an exclusive shoot with her grandchildren. She never subscribed to the forced nature of stock studios with different backgrounds and positions for everyone in the family. She thought they might be worth holding onto now that he was "going places". Will missed out on an hour of Gym that day.

His nap was before lunch and so Will was somewhat rested by the time he took a seat at a cafeteria table in a corner that mostly kept him and his friends out of sight and out of mind. His tray was piled with the usual school lunch fixings since he'd found a chunk of

something unknown in a slice a year ago – and they let him off by giving him a second heaping of mac and cheese and mash potatoes with an extra slice of tomato in his salad. This time he got another pudding cup too. Ms. Sloane had remembered him disappearing and seemed to pick up that it was around this time in the year.

Mike was looking rather sour, although that wasn't too concerning considering all they were thinking about, but this time it had nothing to do with lingering memories, rather their present problems.

"I can't believe Johnson made me do an extra five laps – and what kind of excuse is 'your legs are longer so you have an advantage'? I'm just as pathetic now as I would be with a smaller stature."

"He did that to me last year when these babies started to look bigger," Dustin brought up his arms. His baby chub had stretched out over the last couple of years. "Forced me up the rope twice to prove my genetics wasn't making me a fraud."

"What the hell does that even mean?" Lucas questioned mockingly.

"Don't know, but I don't think Indiana requires their Gym teachers to know lickity split about biology, so that could explain it."

Lucas gave a short laugh and turned to see Will had joined the three. His face faltered a little as he realised his friend had missed the last class.

"And where were you before?"

The other two waited to hear what he had to say as Will shrugged his shoulders, "I didn't sleep well last night...I took a nap in Gregson's office. Was Johnson asking after me?"

"No, but you didn't give us a heads up either man," Mike admitted.

"Yeah," Will said tiredly, "Thing is if I did, you'd all find a way to try and join me, and there's not a lot of space in Gregson's sick bay."

Mike didn't seem to be appeased by this response, but Lucas and Dustin wouldn't press further, because it wasn't worth getting into during school.

Just while Will was halfway through lunch, something else figuratively painful decided to come up instead.

The universe wanted to create some chaos where it shouldn't be made.

"And here I thought the queer had done us a favour and gone off the deep end for good this time."

Mike stood up from their table with no hesitation and Lucas wasn't too far behind him. Dustin lamented through his effort but seemed unbothered by Troy's existence today.

If Troy was angry enough to attack any of them in the cafeteria, he'd likely be suspended, or depending on his track record of getting caught, his parents sway with the board and how much the school was willing to put up with, expelled.

If he attacked Will, then that was another story entirely.

After the events that were still mysterious to the teenagers in Hawkins, Will was sort of untouchable on most accounts. After all, it was kind of screwed up to go after the kid who disappeared, died and then came back with no real explanation.

That didn't seem to stop Troy, who was still pissed after three years and seemed to pick up where he left off once he figured out a few months later that their greatest protector was gone. That Troy hadn't clued together Mike had a soft spot for their super powered companion gave them some solace when it came to these intense moments when met with the bully and his growing circle. The guys didn't know what might happen if it turned out that Mike was reactionary in a violent manner as well as his classic sacrificial convention.

"Take a hike Donovan."

Dustin, who once more took his seat next to Will, his means of protection in a theoretical way, was sure that this complex that Troy Donovan suffered from should have ended the day a strange girl telekinetically broke his arm, moments after he held a knife to

Dustin's face.

But stupidity was stubborn, and Dustin wanted this to be a war of words, since Mike's loyalty tended to throw him headfirst into idiotic action too. And Troy could sometimes keep up without doing any real damage with words.

"Big talk from you Toothless."

"Your spiel hasn't aged well, as we can all see now," Dustin pointed to his grown in teeth, "and we can't be assed trying to entertain your old material any longer."

Lucas looked wide-eyed toward Dustin as he shook his head at his nonchalant friend. Will looked surprisingly pleased with this development and remained seated. Mike's glare never seemed to avert from Troy.

Troy pushed Lucas out of the way and Dustin was grabbed by the collar, making a strangled gasping noise as Will stood up as well. James was already smugly glaring down Lucas who was a few inches shorter than him, and a guy named Brock who joined the group not long after freshman year shoved Mike back into his seat. This left Will as their extra guy.

"God, what is your damage Troy?"

If Dustin speaking as condescendingly as he did to his permanent school bully had gathered the masses in interest in the school cafeteria, Will's voice, no longer breaking, standing ready and questioning Troy's actions certainly held them all to attention. It was eerily quiet as everyone watched on in anticipation.

Dustin was shoved back into his seat as Troy moved to Will, deliberating on what his next move should be. Slowly his smile erupted into that of a glower. Figuring it should put him in unease, he was thrown to see the challenging glare remain stony on his features.

"You're my problem – your existence is my constant problem Byers – and I wish that you stayed six feet under where the rest of the fags



are."

Whispering spewed forth around them as everyone processed what Troy had said aloud.

"Shut your mouth-"

"I've got this Mike," Will interrupted.

Mike looks mildly distressed by Will's conviction, but let him be once he sees a look he'd never imagined from his friend before. Vulnerable, runt like Will, was fine just on his own for once.

Will looked into Troy's eyes as he smiled in realisation. Troy Donovan had always been fascinated with Will's potential *lifestyle*.

And at one point he'd been scared of what he was too.

Then everything changed, for the worse and those unsettling thoughts for a boy surrounded by people who could never understand were completely pushed away after what he'd experienced.

Will's fears were growing over his undeniable difference between who his friends had crushes on and who he'd found attractive over the coming years, but then he saw hope for the first time, in the form of something that took priority over societal concerns.

Will couldn't give a rat's ass anymore.

He clutched onto his bag, and decided he needed to make this final if he was ever planning on focusing on helping Eleven, at least making some progress on a way back for her. It was the least he could do for the three friends who were willing to get abused alongside him.

"You know Troy, if you think that your bullshit has me shaken anymore, you have no fucking idea what I have lived through."

Will paused for a moment as he started to see the cogs working in Troy's mind, questioning whether this was a threat or a statement. Will didn't wait for him to reach a result.

"No matter how much testosterone you try to squeeze out, you are

nothing to what nearly killed me. So go ahead. Hit me. See if I fucking care."

Troy adjusted himself from the pure surprise he was attempting not to convey to the crowd that was beginning to gather properly. Will didn't need to persist; he just was stony, prepared for what was inevitable.

Troy smirked as he set himself up for impact.

"Well, you asked for it fairy."

Someone cleared their throat not too far in the crowd and it was evidently so tense that people were eager to listen and be silent for the first time in a while. The person who had coughed pushed themselves through.

Cassidy Fox was revealed, long, shiny black hair, her librarian style glasses slipped into her thin and baggy green sweater. Same as she was that morning, 20,000 Leagues Under the Sea was in her hand, her bag on her shoulder.

"Do you really want to go ahead with this Donovan?"

Troy looked between her and Will and maintained his threatening stance. The crowd watched on and waited, biding their time for the climax to hit so they could feed their guilty pleasure. A fight in Hawkins High School hadn't happened in a few years and spectators had been relatively patient until the opportunity arose. It was this churlish desire that caused some to question Cassidy coming forward. It only encouraged Troy.

"Why shouldn't I? Every one wants to see the show. Just stay out of it babe."

"None of these people are on your side," she mentions, unimpressed by the pet name he used for her.

This brings Troy to frown.

"How about this? I don't fucking care if they're on my side Fox."

Cassidy closes her eyes in disbelief and as he's getting ready to punch in Will, which feels like an overhyped effort when she speaks up.

"Karma will care Troy."

Some of the cafeteria spectators burst into laughter, but Cassidy didn't falter from the ridicule. They think she's trying to be noble by using hippy logic to calm the tension. But none of what's in her condemning eyes suggests that in the slightest. And Troy is actually capable of seeing beyond the surface of her message unlike everyone else.

He looks pissed off beyond measure, but Troy looks disgusted toward Will instead.

"Get out of my sight fairy."

Will looks to his friends as they get up and surround him, grabbing what they needed. Even they couldn't gain the power to be left alone entirely after that very dangerous incident. Brock and James look super confused as they waited for some kind of explanation from Troy who refused to divulge them with one.

Lucas and Dustin are on either side of Will as they somewhat drag him out of the cafeteria with Mike trailing behind them, taking one careful look to assess just whether they were in fact safe from physical harm.

Troy started up a rant about how he wouldn't need to calm himself down if the fairy just stayed away. Mike took a deep breath, knowing Will has already dealt with his demons and didn't need to loyally and sometimes stupidly step in for him anymore. If there was anything he felt from this bizarre escape – it was total and utter pride. Will had done something none of them could do before now and he had surely gained everyone's respect after being pitied for so long, and it was enough to drown out the sound of a bully's beaten nonsense.

That was until that nonsense struck a chord Troy Donovan had never aimed for before.

"At least that crazy tramp bitch of yours stayed in the ground."

All four of them broke in their tracks, as the doors to the cafeteria that they'd just exited swung back and forth until they finally slowed to a stop.

There was just one beat as his three best friends in front of him looked perfectly disturbed by what they'd just heard and then it transitioned into something they'd considered but were certain wouldn't happen before now. Fear of how Mike might act from this fresh blow.

Mike's face twisted into something reminiscent to when they watched said girl disperse in their middle school science classroom. But it slowly grew into something they'd never seen before - like he couldn't control something scary within. Dustin and Lucas looked ready to sedate him as Will stood in wait for what might be the most unforeseen mess that could have come of all of this that he'd tried to so hard to suppress.

Turning swiftly on his heel, Mike dropped his backpack on the ground and he burst through the cafeteria doors once more.

"Oh no," moaned Dustin.

The three went back in after him as Mike Wheeler stormed through a bunch of people and approached a rather preoccupied Troy Donovan and punched him square in the jaw.

The dispersing crowd rallied around the two once they realised their need for violence was being sated after an underwhelming performance due to someone else stepping in. Troy fell to the ground in front of Mike. James and Brock, the next threat to Mike, were held back by a pursuing crowd of teens, eager to witness their very own colosseum sport in action.

"FIGHT! FIGHT! FIGHT! FIGHT! FIGHT!"

And Mike didn't hesitate from continuing after the one punch. Landing on top of Troy, effectively holding him down to take his next hits, Mike pounded his fists to Troy's torso.

Troy cried out, clearly unused to being on the other end of his

treatment. Mike wasn't the strongest person in the world, so all he could use was anger and adrenaline combined – as his sister taught him.

Nancy had become a world of knowledge in basic defence and handling a gun. She'd bestowed him with some of these tips the summer before last before she first went off to Columbia. While it wasn't exactly Bruce Lee/Jackie Chan wisdom, it was realistic advice for events such as these, and now that he'd avoided allowing Troy to get a hit in, he was able to stop and start this confrontation.

He aimed one last time for his nose for good measure, and felt the crunch of breaking bone and cartilage bouncing around. Blood gushed in an anticlimactic way, but Mike felt it on his knuckles nevertheless. This was when he recalled being eventually pulled off by his friends.

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It was all a haze for him, as though he left his body and woke up again when in the principle's office waiting room. He felt his hands were cold and saw they were wrapped in ice packs covered in dishcloths.

"The unexpected vigilante hero returns to the present."

Mike regretfully looks at Will, who is sitting with him and sighs. "If I'm here then where is Donovan?"

"Sick Bay, obviously - maybe the hospital, probably the hospital. It all depends on how bad you did his face in."

Mike's head fell back against the wall melodramatically.

"You just hulked out on the guy. No one would say he didn't deserve it though. Fox is in there now pleading your case."

"Why is she doing that?" Mike asked perplexed.

"Because Donovan's parents are in denial of how much of a dick he is, and this isn't the first time this has happened," Will mentioned, "– except last time, Donovan managed to get the upper hand again and claim self defence while some kid spent his time in the sick bay."

Other than your Mom owning the PTA, you need some unbiased witnesses."

"Are you a *biased* witness?" Mike responded, as the pain of connecting his knuckles to Donovan's jaw was beginning to set in and not feel like any ache he'd felt before.

Will shook his head in humour as he tightened the dishcloths around Mike's hand. "I'm a crucial witness, considering I de-escalated the situation in the first place."

"Which was super badass before I went and ruined it."

Will shook his head adamantly. "Oh I felt badass when I was doing it too. But Mike, no one blames you for losing your shit."

The door to Principal Martinez's office opened to reveal Cassidy Fox once more and Mike was beginning to see it as an omen of sorts.

Cassidy caught sight of them and she walked past them toward the door. Once she held it open to let herself as Mike watched her with an unconvinced frown and Will seemed curious more than suspicious, she paused. Looking over at the two teenagers she was clearly conflicted.

"I'm never one for violence...but Donovan clearly struck a nerve with you on purpose – and that was some bullshit."

Mike blinked a couple of times in confusion. He responded uncertainly, "Thanks?"

She nodded jerkily, and finally left the waiting room, the door closing softly behind her.

"Will, you're next," Principal Martinez called to him.

He got up and left his friend to deal with his own thoughts as he entered the Principal's office.

After a good ten minutes of a detailed account with some follow up questions from Principal Martinez, Will left the office and swapped with Mike. Will was meant to go straight to his next class, but as he

left the waiting room into the school hallway, the cool of the linoleum lined floors taking away his sweat induced by anxiety, an uncomfortable lump grew in his stomach.

Karen Wheeler was at the other end of the hallway, having just turned a corner from the school entranceway.

Will was in her sight and knew he couldn't avoid some sort of a pre-talk to confirm or deny her worst fears for this emergency meeting about her son getting into a fight. She hurried her steps toward the fifteen year old boy and looked a little manic.

"Will, please tell me he isn't badly injured?"

"He's bruised his knuckles Mrs. Wheeler. And maybe his feelings were hurt before his knuckles hurt."

She looked relieved only for that to change.

"How bad is the other boy?"

Will's face scrunched up at the memory. Troy was an absolute mess after Mike made mince meat of his nose.

"He's got a broken nose, and a broken ego. Maybe some heavy bruising – I don't know, it happened all so fast."

A hand shot through her hair with discontent. "Who did Mike do this to Will?"

"Troy Donovan."

Then her features had a whole new set of emotions. "He's been giving Mike trouble for a while hasn't he? Mike didn't just lash out at some random kid?"

"Since middle school."

Karen Wheeler straightened herself up once she gathered all the necessary immediate information to calm her before she had to put on the right face to confront Mike's actions and punishment on top of that.

"I guess I'm not coming over tonight, Mrs. Wheeler?"

This took her out of her reverie as she shook her head in disbelief. "Mike may be in trouble Will, but that doesn't mean I stop keeping an eye on you while your mother is working. You're still staying for dinner."

It wasn't a polite question but a firm statement. Will knew Mrs. Wheeler had been really thrown after getting the call from the school about Mike if she wasn't keeping up appearances with him.

He went off to class as she entered the waiting room.

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Karen was ushered in with the receptionist's say so and knocked impatiently on the wooden door with freshly printed black letters.

"Come in," came a voice very familiar to Karen Wheeler.

She didn't hesitate to push her way in, only to startle her son in the process.

"Mom?"

Karen looked at Michael sternly for a moment as he regained some composure in light of why he was in the office in the first place. He figured she might have understood, but the act was quite hard to look past as a parent with pacifying beliefs.

"Karen, I'm glad you could make it."

Principal Martinez gestured for her to take a seat beside her son, of which she now noticed his injured hands and felt a suddenly pang of maternity take over.

"I'm sorry Harriet, I have to check on this for myself."

"Of course."

"Mom it's not that bad-"

"Michael, now is not the time," Karen said hastily as she carefully



unwrapped the makeshift dishcloth bandages, holding up ice packs around his knuckles.

They were undoubtedly bruised, and she watched as her son tried not to flinch when she took his hand that was worse off, his right hand, the defter of the two he had, to see his knuckles had split and were red with raw skin. Even if she was of the opinion that they shouldn't be used for what he evidently did not half an hour ago, she figured he held up pretty well in comparison to what she'd seen of her brother when he'd been in school fights.

"Nurse Gregson says it's only a matter of being gentle with his healing," reassured Principal Martinez.

"I must thank her for her care when I see her next."

Rewrapping the dishcloths with the ice packs around her teenage son's knuckles, seething again as they covered his right hand particularly.

Karen exerted a tired sigh and said bluntly, "What happened – and how bad is it?"

Principal Martinez wasn't sure how to begin, a clash of disbelief and uncertainty of all the details forcing her down to the main points.

"An argument between Michael and his friends and Troy Donovan and his friends was beginning in the cafeteria when a couple of the kids managed to quell it from getting out of hand with violence."

Karen looked very perturbed at a missing detail.

"Where were the teachers on duty when this was happening?"

Martinez sighed when she remembered that Karen had the senses of an eagle when it came to details. "While the cafeteria was calm a teacher on duty took a cigarette break. I know Karen, it's being dealt with, believe me."

Karen shook her head incredulously, but didn't stop the meeting for this detail as the Principal continued.

She had received every detail of the original de-escalation, to the two groups being separated by their own means, only for Mike to attack the teenage boy antagonising Will Byers originally.

Karen looked questioning toward Mike. Principal Martinez watched as one of her better students shrunk under his mother's stare.

"Michael, you can wait outside, I need to speak with your mother in private."

Michael looked stunned at the casual tone his Principal had for him considering he'd done the most damage to another student in the last decade. He nodded and stood up stiffly. As he reached the door, he quickly looked back.

"May I ask what my punishment is, Principal Martinez?"

Principal Martinez gave a breathy laugh, imparting more surprise that this was the same boy who laid into one of her more troublesome students with hardly a scratch in return. This was not the words of a violent youth heading down the wrong path. "Since you asked so politely..."

Mike turned to face her properly as she settled it in her mind.

"After listening and reviewing the accounts of yourself, Mr. Donovan, Mr. Byers. and Ms. Fox, I've concluded that you'll have to attend Saturday detention, this weekend. In that detention you're required to write up an essay on why violence isn't the answer, and you can hand that in to me first thing Monday morning."

Mike's heart slowed down to an agreeable speed and he nodded in acceptance. He had expected far worse than that. A note on his permanent record, suspension, and if she had been incredibly strict and inconsiderate of first time offenders, expulsion. Mike couldn't truly believe his luck but tried to emanate a stoic demeanour.

"Thank you Principal Martinez."

Once he was out, Karen let her head fall into her hands.

"There's something you're not telling me Harriet."

"Because it's deeper than I think I'm permitted to know."

Karen frowned at hearing this. "My son beat up Patricia Donovan's kid, who hasn't ever held forgiveness as a virtue so she's going to be a treat when she "runs" into me. I mean how deep could this really be?"

Principal Martinez sighed. An appeal was probably the only way she could translate this mishap.

"Michael is a good kid, an A+ student, contributes to the school, AV club member, State Science Fair participant. Scott couldn't recommend him or those boys more when they transitioned over from the Middle School. When it comes to the problems these kids have in these halls, and there are many, Michael is quite passive – and it's good not to worry about every single student under my care...but something caused him to react that way – to do that to Troy Donovan, a student who has been a problem since his last year Elementary and flexes a hot tempered tongue when he pleases, that most of the kids can ignore him because his attacks haven't had the same impact as they used to."

Karen didn't have any input for this comment, too immersed in sensing much the same thing as she looked over the last few days. She had noticed a change in her son, and she had a feeling it had to do with that week back when he was twelve but she wasn't sure it was appropriate to bring these private and remarkably strange affairs to Michael's Principal unless absolutely prompted to.

"Is there anything different at home Karen?"

"Other than Nancy leaving for College last year, nothing. It was an adjustment for Holly, but Michael is satisfied with hearing from her when she calls home every other week."

Principal Martinez was disappointed nothing could be discovered from there.

"I was hoping I wouldn't have to do this," Principal Martinez pulled out a notebook of her own and brought out her reading glasses. She flipped to the page she'd written down in last and her index finger found the passage she'd found stuck with her most.

"When recording Ms. Fox's account she mentioned that Mr. Donovan said something that may have triggered Michael to become violent, and be mindful, the language is...colourful. "At least that crazy tramp bitch of yours stayed in the ground"."

Karen held in a gasp at the malicious combination and her heart picked up when she realised what had caused all of this.

"Oh God, Michael," she said, as her hand began to cover her mouth regretfully.

Principal Martinez waited with baited patience and Karen rubbed her temples before dragging out a sigh. Truthfully she didn't know how to explain it, when she was never exposed to the full story and much of it was still a mystery to her to this day. But she knew it was still a very sensitive subject for her boy.

"Three years ago, Michael lost a friend very dear to him, a girl, and I...didn't know her very well – her home situation wasn't good at all. I think she was sick, which explains the early passing. The only thing I really know is that she was fearless because Troy met her and when he tried to hurt Michael, she broke his arm."

It was the most she could ever get out of Michael, and she had seen the distinctive light in his eyes when talking about the story of a confrontation where he ended up victor just once before, all because of a quiet, yet protective girl. And just when the reality came crashing in once more, he'd become a shell of who he used to be.

Thankfully, time did heal him a little bit – but clearly the pain of this girl's memory didn't leave entirely.

Quietly astonished, Principal Martinez closed the book. "Well, I'm glad you told me Karen. Michael can leave early today."

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Inside, Michael was a mixture of emotions. He was elated nothing terrible was going to happen to him as a consequence for his actions – he wasn't even asked to apologise to Troy and he felt like that would be a slap in the face if that came up in the proceedings of his punishment.

But his mind had been drifting to what caused him to land one in Troy's face for the first time ever. Mike didn't tend to stick up for himself but gallantly accessed a stupid bravery somewhere in his veins when his friends were in mighty peril. He didn't often fight unless he had to stand ready in defence, but they'd never escalated to the point where someone was hospitalised. And he half expected that someone to be him had he ever ended up in such an affair.

Avoiding her for the last year as a way of getting by had caused this. He had thrown himself headfirst into a fistfight where the opponent didn't get one hit in, because Troy Donovan had forced him headfirst into thinking about her undeniably. Mike would never think she was gone completely from his thoughts; there was always an Eleven lingering in the back, always present – just on mute for the most part so that he could stay sane.

If Mike constantly pictured her dead and rotting somewhere he couldn't reach her – or dying and cold where he couldn't find her – it tore at Mike now. Because thinking of her in the present meant taking in all the factors – all the questions and all the messed up images of the scenarios she'd be in because she wasn't prepared whatsoever for the horrors of this world and yet was equipped with the abilities to keep her alive from potential danger.

*The elements could have had their way with her though.*

Mike forced himself not to punch his gut in utter disgust so as to not disturb the receptionist into thinking he was having a mental breakdown.

He wasn't, not really.

His jaw was clenched uncomfortably, his leg bouncing up and down with anxiety, and he hadn't realised this entire time because Eleven was front and centre in his thoughts in an environment where he couldn't be vulnerable, couldn't risk anyone outside the immediate group he trusted to see him cry. Teenagers were ruthless – enough not to care for the reasons for someone's melancholy, and especially to kids like him – who blended into the lockers and played Dungeons and Dragons in a basement that would eventually grow a musk of teen boy if not well maintained to his mother's desire.

While thinking about Eleven brought him to the breaking point, he figured thinking about how his Mom would punish him over this uncontrolled lashing out prevented him from drowning in his mind.

His Mom understood at the most necessary times, like when Will went missing. She let him stay home from school when it was clear it was affecting him while he built up a lie about being sick.

But this was a little different than skipping a day of school.

Mike stood up when his Mom left the office with Principal Martinez.

"You're going home early today Mike. I'll see you Saturday for your detention," Martinez sent him off.

Mike couldn't quite comprehend how everyone was being civil with him after he'd been so brutal to Troy. Even his Mom looked less angry with him, only somewhat worried.

This started to worry Mike too.

Once he had his stuff from his locker, he got into the passenger seat with his mother pulling away once he buckled up at her insistence.

"You know I'm disappointed you resorted to violence."

"I'm sorry Mom."

"And I wish you'd exercised some sort of, I don't know, breathing techniques before getting into – into fisticuffs with that little asshole."

"I know – I shouldn't have..."

Karen took a turn and Mike's mouth hung open, empty of the excuses he was about to spout and the promises he'd never do it again. Karen Wheeler – homecoming queen and enviable house Mom, cursed.

"Oh don't act so surprised Mike. That kid's had it coming for years – I'm just shocked it was you who dealt it."

Mike nodded. He supposed everybody would be surprised that tepid Mike Wheeler beat up Troy of all the people. He was shocked he had

it in him. But he saw the immediate alarm that took over his friends after they'd soaked in just what Troy had said. Maybe they'd seen it in him before he could ever comprehend it.

His mother seemed to be ruminating, probably much the same as he was – and he knew she never once advocated for his type of actions. This was solely on him, yet he wasn't the only one who would see problems from it.

"I hope this doesn't get you in any trouble Mom," Mike spoke sincerely, as he looked at his hands.

"Oh sweetie, it won't," she reassured him. It was the first time she'd fully understood him, but it was something.

"But Mom, you actually like being in the PTA and helping out and if this takes you away from that-"

While at a red light, she took his hand in hers and looked to him directly.

"Patricia Donovan is in for a rude awakening if she thinks this will do anything to my position in the PTA. And first and foremost, I care for you three – always. And it's the best thing I can do on this earth."

Mike swallowed a lump of guilt away – she was doing her best to calm him down, but even he knew his sweet yet overly involved mother was confident with her place in the world.

"Besides – what he said to you Mike...I'd find it hard not to throw a dictionary where it counts."

"Martinez told you?" Mike groaned, but she held tight onto his hand.

"Of course Mike. And I wish you would tell me more to be honest."

He nodded subtly and looked out the front window.

"Mom?"

"Yes sweetie?"

"It's green."

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Author's Note:

*"What is your damage Heather?"* is one of my favourite lines in a film ever, and *Heathers* full of the best lines.

Figured it was a "Like Mother, Like Son" situation.

Also if you're in need for some music during your reading, anything remotely 80's will do.



### 3. Don't You Forget About Me

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#### Chapter Three

#### Don't You Forget About Me

There is a quiet clattering of knives and forks against crockery as a steaming lasagne with vegetables is served on everyone's plates, to be consumed with gusto by only one – an impervious father. Holly plays with her food, despite her mother's calm warnings. No one seemed able to talk comfortably at the Wheeler dining table after Will has finished answering Karen's questions.

Mike is trying to keep his head down and out of the conversation but for the first time in a while, his father surprises him.

"Why are your hands wrapped up like that Mike?"

Mike swallowed the piece of lasagne on his fork too quickly and some of it goes down his air pipe. He chokes a little, coughing arbitrarily until Will sends a direct hit just in the right spot in his upper back. The tickle of a foreign object going to the wrong place internally is finally alleviated and he gives a few deep breaths, looking gratefully at Will.

"I was going to talk about this with you later Ted, but now that you've...brought it up, Mike got into a fight at school today."

His father is quite apathetic at hearing most things but this time he's taken aback.

"You – you got into a fight?"

"Yes, that's why Mike's hands are bandaged. He's bruised them but they should heal in time for the future snow shovelling he'll be doing this coming winter."

Mike is ready to protest, but her raised eyebrows do all the talking for her, and his defence dies down in his throat, as he sits back in his

chair. Will smiled sympathetically at his friend.

"I figured if you'd be in a tussle at school, ever, you'd be sporting some shiners too."

"They're on his knuckles and thankfully, nowhere else," Karen scolded.

"So how bad is the other guy then?"

"Ted!"

"Pretty bad," Mike admitted.

"Michael, don't participate," Karen warned. She felt herself blushing slightly, "I'm sorry you had to see that Will."

"No need to apologise Mrs. Wheeler. This lasagne is great by the way."

"Thank you honey."

"So how did you get the upper hand?" Ted quietly asked while he believed his wife was distracted.

"I...I honestly don't remember Dad."

"The very definition of seeing red," Will added hastily as he can see the growing annoyance on Mrs. Wheeler's face. He deflects the conversation with only the finesse a child of divorce could have. "How was school Holly?"

The little girl who is now six years old and just started the first grade is twirling her fork in only an abundant curiosity a child could behold. Holly didn't find absolutely everything frightening anymore and sat up at Will's question, and responded eagerly retelling her day with every finite detail that only she could deem important as her blonde plaits shake about with enthusiasm.

Karen beamed as her daughter was the epitome of innocence yet untainted and Mike started to zone out once his little sister goes on about some ladybug she found during recess. Will is amused to say

the least and Ted Wheeler has given up trying to stay on the topic, knowing how sensitive his youngest is to be disrupted.

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As Will and Mike were studying down in the basement, they avoided the fun they could be having instead to follow Karen's rule that Mike was still technically in trouble. He really didn't want to exacerbate her disappointment into being grounded since this weekend was just too important to him, so they quietly whispered to each other the answers to their English homework. However Will couldn't help but point out one thing from the dinner.

"Hey Mike – you know how you said you didn't remember much from the fight?"

"Like you said, I was seeing red."

Quiet flowed through the basement as Will began to bite down on his lips, hiding his smile.

"You don't remember saying anything while you were pounding Troy in the chest?"

"No Will, I really don't...wait did I say things?"

Will nodded as he was struggling to hold on to what he witnessed.

"Well what did I say?!"

His friend had to compose himself just a little before he could emit anything, "You said, and I quote: *I can't wait for the day I get to dance on your grave you acne ridden fuckwit.*"

Mike dropped his pen and slapped both his hands on his mouth after he snorted uncharitably. "I said that?"

"Kind of why I thought you would get in more trouble – but not enough people heard you and I never put that in my account. I don't think Troy was even conscious enough to have caught on."

"Martinez never mentioned it. Fox mustn't have told her either."

"Well I'm glad I've got that in my memory – Dustin would just start giggling on the way home out of nowhere because it just kept coming back into his mind."

The phone started to ring upstairs and Will and Mike immediately set their heads down to work out of habit. Both relaxed for a second before not long after Mike was called up to talk to his sister.

Mike's shoulders sagged. He had a feeling, deep in his stomach that this call wasn't dissimilar to the one he received last year. Taking two stairs at a time up to the house he took the phone off his mother who had clearly just been discussing how his wayward behaviour had started that day. He waited for her to give him some distance before he spoke.

"Nancy?"

*"Well hello to you too Rocky."*

Mike groaned in annoyance, "I didn't think she got every detail in yet."

*"Mom has her ways. I had to hide my pride when she was telling me. I can't believe you laid into that little shit for once."*

Mike couldn't help but smile at the gratification in her tone. Nancy had been in his corner even if he threw the first punch.

*"And to think Mom wants me to come back home this Christmas to set you right, of all the things."*

Mike snorted with a chuckle to follow it.

*"But what happened? I mean, this is not very...you."*

Mike went quiet for a moment and he wondered how he could get into this while working his way tentatively around the point. It seemed in trying to find a quick exit he left his sister hanging.

"Mike?"

"Uh, yeah?"

*"No more secrets. Remember?"*

Mike sighed and said, "I know. He said something about...her."

*"What? How does he know about her?"*

"You remember the Quarry story?"

*"Ohhhhhhh. Okay."*

She went quiet too for a few seconds as Mike was preparing for whatever pinprick questions she might have for him because of it. Instead she continued to focus on Troy.

*"That little fucker. Who does he think he is?"*

"Troy Donovan, that's who," but Mike does his best to brush it off now his adrenaline is gone. "It doesn't matter now though. I broke his nose Nance."

*"Used what I taught you? Caught him off guard?"*

"Yeah, only thing is it doesn't feel very noble," Mike sheepishly admitted.

His sister snorted from her end, *"Mike, there's nothing noble about fighting, and that whole façade can be left behind with the knights. For those of us who are much smaller – sometimes you need everything you can get. Besides using someone's weakness against them isn't that dirty – it's not like you gouged his eyes out or anything."*

"The guys pulled me off before I could start pulling his teeth out and getting the guillotine ready," he sarcastically replied.

"Ew, Mike," Nancy said with some disgust, which baffled Mike since she was playing with guns and defence now.

*"How are those three dorks anyway?"*

"They're fine I suppose, better now that Lucas has a car," Mike said quietly, guilt tripping her.

*"Mike, I won't repeat this ever again. I need my car."*

"You're in New York Nancy, what could you possibly need a car for?" argued Mike, an ongoing, longwinded argument of him trying to convince his sister had no use of a car when he could use it at home.

*"You're not even sixteen yet! And what could you possibly want with my car?"*

Mike could practically feel his sister rolling her eyes at him through the phone.

Suddenly she spoke up very excitedly.

*"...Oh my god, is there a girl I don't know about?"*

Mike almost hiccupped in reaction to even hearing such a suggestion, "You know I haven't – well – I haven't cared much for girls in a while."

Nancy sighed, careful of what was bound to come next. *"Right, sorry Mike...are you okay?"*

They were always going to get to the point no matter how much Mike edged away from it. And it all started to freeze up on the subject properly around the time before Nancy left for college, when she took him to the shooting range she'd been going to without their parents' knowledge.

Mike had been struggling at that time, more obviously than he currently was anyway. His mother didn't know what to do and as much as his friends were the best distraction, just being around them was a constant reminder of what they all lost. They always knew they would get Will back – or at least they were blind in their faith that would get him back, because Eleven, despite her faults was helping them to her utmost abilities. And Will returned and they were so blessed she'd been there to help them.

But when they tried to do the same for her, the old tried and true methods that they used to find Will never quite reached, because she was unreachable without the assistance of her powers to guide them through the radio waves. Will was different and El was gone, and it

took Mike until the summer of 1985 to see that those factors wouldn't change because he wanted them to. While Mike didn't realise this, it was truly the end of his childhood the day he accepted that he would never see Eleven again.

As he was coming to terms with this, Nancy pulled him out of his cave one morning and told him to get up and get dressed, that a granola bar and apple with a grape juice box were waiting on the bench for him and to hurry his ass up because it was the last juice box and Holly wasn't aware of that fact yet.

He was pulled into her car shortly after and she started the hour drive to Indianapolis central.

It was then Mike found out what his sister, off to Pre Med at Columbia the coming Fall, was up to when she wasn't working her Summer job.

When they parked in front of an indoor and outdoor shooting range, Mike wasn't sure his sister had the right address. He remembered how she confirmed it was definitely the right place when he'd never said anything but looked confused nonetheless.

Nancy had been treated like a regular and Mike being her sibling was given the full tour. Then a man with a greying beard and a bald head erring into his fifties with an incredibly intimidating build considering his age hugged Nancy like she was one of his own and looked as though he recognised Mike. Once introduced, the man's name turned out to be Ozzie, and he had the accent of a southern gentleman, which was also strange since Indiana wasn't famous for bringing warmer weathered people to its state.

Despite looking like he could rip Mike in half with his bare hands, Ozzie was very kind and patient, which the accent probably aided in keeping Mike relaxed. The guns too freaked Mike out, as his brain's memories greatest hits had a gun squarely pointed at him while trying to help Eleven get away from her 'Papa'. But Ozzie eased the tension once he went into the technical side of each gun and started to actually gain Mike's interest. Apparently he hadn't given Nancy all the details like he'd given Mike and she supposed this was because Ozzie knew how to appeal to each and every individual, Mike liking

the detail of what was a mechanised weapon. Ozzie had a keener sense than most adults Mike knew, and didn't come off condescending to him once.

There was another person that Nancy talked about a lot, but he didn't get the opportunity to meet Zoe, Nancy's other mentor in the gun range. But Mike knew Nancy wasn't the type to puff up anyone's image so had a feeling she was true to his sister's description.

Nancy had been coming since 1984, but it wasn't until 1985 that Mike was becoming more baffled by his older sister's new priorities. And she was one hell of a shot too.

But Mike hadn't been totally sure why she would take up this very left of field hobby and enjoy it too.

Admittedly Nancy's pool of friends heavily depleted when Barb left and so she was stuck with Steve until they broke up, surprisingly amicably, before he went to college in California a year before she left for New York. This also left her with a lot of spare time.

She had attempted to find some way to cathartically release her deepest darkest emotions while also bringing herself some true repose from the ache that mourning did to a young adult. It was hard to find such an activity that was actually satisfying.

When her shotgun supplied by Ozzie was cocked away from Mike for safety purposes, she was getting her bullets ready when Nancy bluntly explained what she felt was missing from the obvious narrative.

She'd tried all this new age junk to centre her soul and bring herself serenity but she wasn't a believer and she was finding the trend of working out through aerobics to just be an exercise that didn't expose herself reflectively. While she found the meditating did help her focus on her new hobby more, it wasn't the centre of her life.

And while shooting a gun at a target was whittled down to her sadness and guilt for Barb's early loss – he knew that there was something more determined behind her eyes that didn't fit the mourning girl's tale. There was a hate and a readiness he hadn't seen



before and he felt as though she was picturing herself in the Byers house, with the Christmas lights strung up in every corner possible and across the ceiling, as they began to flicker in a way that could only feel like the sinister presence of a Demogorgon. Suddenly shot after shot rang out and even with the cushioning headphones, Mike could feel every shot whirring through the air and hitting the target with an accuracy of someone willing to have trained as much as she had.

Once she was out, Nancy placed her gun on the table in front of her. As they both took their headphones off, she wasn't necessarily smiling anymore, but she was at peace, and that was what counted.

Mike couldn't help but voice his thoughts at the time.

*"Is this all you get out of shooting a gun at a mark?"*

He hadn't expected the answer he got from her, were he to be basing it on the years he knew her as the girl who became enthralled by the likes of Steve Harrington, pre-reckoning, but it stayed with him to that day.

*"If you believe that Eleven can come back - then I believe those things can find a way too. And I want to be capable when that day comes."*

That was when she put a gun in his hands, the same one, because that's what she believed he should start with. She never said if to the idea, but believed it was a matter of when. And just as he was starting to believe it was no longer an option.

*"Mike? Mike, are you there?"*

Mike inhaled sharply as he realised he was sinking into his memories again – a habit he'd picked up when he was thirteen, and that he was actually still on the phone to his sister.

"Sorry, I'm here."

*"Did you zone out mid-phone call?"* she sounded somewhat amused considering the nature of her question that sent him off into his head in the first place.

"Might have," Mike responded sheepishly.

He heard her sigh – the same way his mom did when she was concerned.

*"You can't avoid this forever. You won't even say her name."*

This stung him where he didn't want it.

"Do I ask you to say Barb's name?"

He regretted it the minute it fell from his lips.

*"We both know I haven't got a problem with thinking about Barb anymore Mike."*

"I'm sorry Nancy, that was really out of line."

*"And I knew you'd figure that out eventually too."*

Mike knew he was probably being childish by being overly defensive and becoming mute to her name aloud – after all, it had been spelled on his brain the minute he decided to punch Troy in the face. But up until then, it had been his coping mechanism for a couple of years and it held up well.

Until he beat up Troy, but that was a one off – Mike had to be certain on that.

*"- if you don't talk about this to your friends, or Mom or me – you're going to end up mentally imploding – and I'm really worried the result next time won't be you just burying your fists into some douche bag."*

She'd been oddly in sync with him lately but he couldn't say what he really wanted to. Mike had been pushing it with this phone call, let alone this week existing every year and Troy even having the gall to mention her at all. And Nancy was right, he did feel like both imploding and exploding but Mike had to hold it together otherwise he'd be more of a mess than he was already.

*"Just promise me you'll get it out of your system Mike, please?"*

Mike swallowed away his pride and rubbed his eyes, feeling how heavy they'd grown over the day. If he had to assuage his sister's concerns as well as everyone else's,

Mike would have to go along with it.

"Okay Nancy."

Mike still hadn't said her name aloud. And he wasn't sure if he ever could bring himself to do so again.

---

Will was in his own incredibly uncertain headspace after Mike went upstairs to take the call from his sister. He was rubbing his eyes absentmindedly and yawning, ready for a full night's sleep, after he'd done all he could in helping Eleven that day once he reached the privacy of his room.

It was just a matter of waiting to be transported into the Upside Down again – and being lucky enough to be in the same exact place at the same exact time again.

Looking down at his English homework, Will knew it was only taunting him because he was stuck on one final question, but wouldn't be able to concentrate on it as he started trying to think of ways to send himself to the place he would have rather avoided. All he desired was to be able to control this ability to send himself to the Upside Down.

It was then he felt something sit beside him, and he moved as though to give it space.

When his body consciously connected this bizarre happening to his thoughts, Will felt his stomach drop. There was nothing beside him on the sofa and yet he felt he needed to check regardless.

The tickling in his stomach started to occur sooner than he thought, and Will began to panic which only aggravated the gagging. This was not the time or the place, but the universe wasn't about to give him an out when he began to cough up a new slug.

It was nearly a ruler's length and Will was forced to pull it out with

his own hands just to speed up the process, which made him feel more vile than he had anticipated.

His sickness effected him every so often to the point that he could guess when the next bout would occur, but this had been too soon after the last one, which was only the night before.

He closed his eyes, trying to slow down his breathing. Will hadn't ever had a fit outside of his house before. He figured it was due to some overly familiar feeling about his house and the replica within the Upside Down able to set him off mixed with his struggle to stop going there.

Slowly, as he opened his eyes, Will found himself in the Upside Down in Mike's basement.

But the same eeriness wasn't there as it had been in his room, filled with spores and damp walls and cold floors. Remnants of the Upside Down definitely clung to the basement but wasn't as strong as the plague that Will was constantly pushing back in his short time in the same dimension.

Life seemed to show itself in the form of artefacts that weren't tainted by the touch of toxicity and there was light illuminating the basement from several different outlets of flashlights collected around the room. What little of the outside world that was usually seen through the small basement window in the normal dimension was caved in, a product of an event Mike wouldn't like to find out about. It wasn't warm, but something about it felt kind of like the original.

"Will?"

Said teenager shot up from his spot as he saw a girl sitting there next to him, quiet as a mouse.

Eleven.

She looked as tired as he feels, black circles chronically existing around her eyes and a complexion that screams that she hadn't seen the sun in years. She honestly looks a little radioactive too, with a green tinge to every inch of her skin.

Her hair is longer as he had sketched out, but there are places where it needs serious intervention. And she wears layers of warm sweaters and a pair of tracksuit pants with tennis shoes that have seen better years.

She is smaller in mass considering all her layers, and more on the thin side, evident in her gaunt face, which makes him question several things of which he hadn't come across in his initial shock from seeing her the night before.

Slowly and very cautiously, Will sat back down on the sofa.

"It's really you, isn't it?"

Eleven blinks tiredly and nods. Will finally notices something in her hands, something she must have recently taken off.

"Is that a gas mask?"

Again she nods and hands it over for him to look at. Its clunky and heavy, but a necessity to get by in the Upside Down without going mad.

"You wear this all the time?"

"Yes," she breathes out carefully. It's not a very flattering device, so she took it off so she didn't frighten Will upon arrival. "How...how are you here?"

Will was uncertain how to answer. "I don't really know...but sometimes, when I feel sick – I come back. Only briefly though," which causes him to consider just how much time he does have with her, "Eleven – do you live here?"

She gave Will a small smile and nods with some sort of pride, "I feel safe here."

Will surmised it was partly because she was once safe in the normal dimension in Mike's basement and that Mike was also a constant presence in his own too. But it began to raise the first reactionary questions he had of this interaction alone from his prepared ones.

"Did you...did you touch me...before I arrived, just now?" Will struggled to phrase.

Eleven slowly nodded. "I felt something there...I thought it might be..."

Will didn't need her to finish the thought. But it certainly raised another query he had, based on his experience the other night.

"If you live here, why were you in my bed last night?"

Eleven shrugged, also struggling to find the right words. "I felt something...something warm taking me there. Warm is good here."

"Did you feel the same thing here too?"

"Yes, same thing," Eleven's stunted answer came out with her own mix of confusion.

Will relaxed back into the sofa as he took this information in. He had thousands of questions, both about this sensory phenomenon they shared and just how in the hell she was still alive, but he had to prioritise his efforts. He sat up and put his hand on hers. Eleven looked startled but calmed herself down when she realised that Will's hands were soft and warm. She had been starved of human interaction – that Will could tell, but she took his hand back in hers when he tried to pull away in realising he might have pushed her in the wrong direction. Will decided to stay on topic than mention her clear want of physical affection of any sort.

"Eleven, you can't live breathing through a gas mask anymore."

"But I need it."

Will smiled and shook his head, "I mean that you need to come home."

Eleven shook her head adamantly, and tears began to spring up that she couldn't wipe away,

"I can't."

"Why not?"

Eleven gestured to the caved in basement window that was the depiction of the outside of this mini haven to her.

"Is it too dangerous out there?"

"No," Eleven whispered, as years of time and incidents proved she was always the victor.

"Then why can't you come home Eleven?"

"I'm responsible, okay!"

Will hadn't expected this, for her to so adamantly take the blame and undertake all the burdens that came with it. And she had spoken words that Will wasn't sure was in her vocabulary.

"I brought it here...it killed Barb – it took you." Then she jabbed at her chest as though to reaffirm the blamed.

Will squeezed her hand, forcing her to look up at him, tears flowing freely.

"You didn't do that on purpose Eleven. You were just a kid, just like I was...still am. Barb's death isn't your fault either. And I'm still alive because of you. A lot of people would really like you to come back, and if I know anything – this isn't a place for a girl to live, even a super-powered one."

She was shaking her head in denial.

"I could bring something with me."

Will smiled, bittersweet. If he had been connected to Eleven like this, then that possibility was a potential reality even without her bringing it forward. And the creatures of the Upside Down did exist in the normal dimension...they just never lived very long outside of Will's body.

"We'll deal with it when it comes to that."

The casualty of his reply shocked her tears to stop flowing for just a moment.

"No – Will -"

"Yes, Eleven. Chances are you won't - that won't happen."

Before she can refuse the notion again, Will decides to take a firmer, more direct approach.

"Mike needs you back Eleven. Just trust me on that. And he'd welcome you with open arms, even if a Thessylhydra came out right behind you."

At the mention of Mike, Eleven's eyes bore into Will, as though she were checking him for lying. Her mouth parts slightly and her eyes close as she breathes in deeply.

"If we're connected El, I want to use this to help you get out of here... do you know if you can?"

The guilt of this knowledge seemed evident to Will when she looks away from him and nods.

Will seethed uncomfortably and reassured a suddenly concerned Eleven, "We'll deal with everything when it comes to it. What's important is that we get you out of here as soon as we can. What do we need you to do to get you out?"

Eleven shrugged her shoulders sheepishly, "I don't know how...to leave. Only that I think I can."

Will looked devastated as he still hadn't come up with a way himself and figured that if she could get out, then she would know how.

"There's a spot...near your house."

He looked up with a small measure of conviction in his eyes and watched her carefully as she tried to explain.

He started to feel the same sensation of tugging in his stomach that called time on his visit. He tried very hard to quash it down just for a



little while longer and tried not to let his worry show on his features.

Instead Will squeezed her hands. If this was all they said before he disappeared it would cut him too deeply.

"It's weak, but not open."

Will wasn't sure what she was talking about until he remembered the marked tree in the woods by his house. Nancy had never told him about her very short trip to the Upside Down, but Jonathon remembered the tree where she came back out, and Will was given the necessary heads up a kid would need when fearing the worst. While he'd never found it, he knew there was a spray painted X left on it. That was when a plan began to formulate in the normally creatively inclined teenager who left up these situations for his friends to lead.

"Are you weak too?" asked Will distractedly.

Eleven shook her head, and made a show of where she stood in the hierarchy when contending with the scariest the Upside Down had to offer.

She was on top.

Will felt the coughing fit begin and she looked really worried but Will couldn't let it go before he got out one thing, endeavouring through his words.

"Follow the warmth Eleven, find the Supercom I left behind in Castle Byers and break open the gateway."

His face was red from the effort to get them out clearly but his message got across when she firmly nodded. When he closed his eyes and let out one cruel cough after another, relief was slowly creeping in and wrapping him up with gratitude.

Will's eyes fluttered open, uncertain what he would come back to. His surroundings were the same, but he knew he was back in his dimension. He just felt warmer.

The difference was Eleven could still be felt with him even now when

she was technically not sitting next to him in this dimension, tied to their unexplained connection. No longer did Will see it as something to be frightened of, but something that could be used to their advantage.

Coming at about 12 inches and a little thicker than he wished to have coughed up, the leech like creature Will had coughed up into his hands but ended up on his lap while he was absent in another dimension, was shoved into his pocket when he could hear Mike coming back.

He was slower coming down this time, and had the melancholy disposition that came with probably going back to his past. Will's heart was beating hard against his chest, and just once, hoped that Mike's issues were enough to keep him inattentive to Will's peculiar behaviour.

"Sorry I was up there so long man. Hopper's here for you."

Will was actually happy to be picked up earlier than normal for once, "That's all good man, I started to fall asleep anyway. I'm going to try and get a good rest tonight...maybe you should too."

He patted Mike's shoulder on the way to the stairs, and got up to the next level quickly, a new set determination coursing through his veins. Will stopped in his tracks just on his way out the front door to see Mrs. Wheeler reading, never one not to pick up on a lack of gratitude.

"Bye Mrs. Wheeler, thank you for dinner."

"Anytime Will."

By the time he was in Hopper's passenger seat, he was all nerves and jitters, knee bouncing and fingers twiddling.

Hopper hadn't ever seen him so antsy before and it put him on edge more than he'd care to admit.

"You okay Will?"

"Hmm?" Will was brought out of his thoughts and nodded his head

carefully, before looking out the window and cooling himself down.

Hopper studied him from the corner of his eye from then on, keeping himself mostly to the road. Will wasn't a misbehaved kid, so he didn't think too much of it, but he was acting a lot more sketchy than usual.

At last Hopper figures it's the dastardly date that's doing this to them all.

---

Will rushed into his house and straight to the bathroom before Hopper could put his Chevy in park.

Joyce watches as Will says as much as a "Hello", before becoming a blur into her house and frowns in the direction of Hopper as he closes the door behind himself from the driver's seat. She hears the bathroom door slam shut and realises what caused her son to be so hasty.

"He's kind of jittery tonight," Hopper said as he approached, a mix of confusion and concern.

"I think he just needed the bathroom Jim," Joyce said amused.

Hopper shook his head, unconvinced. "No, he's been like that since he got in my car at the Wheeler's."

"Oh," Joyce frowned, but again shook it off. "Well maybe their bathroom was occupied. You know how he hates to intrude."

While still looking uncertain, Joyce brushed his arm and said, "If there's anything to be worried about, I'll know soon enough. He can't keep many secrets from me."

Meanwhile in the Byers bathroom, Will was throwing the slug into the can he had set aside for burning his second biggest secret he was maintaining for the past three years, with the recent development of Eleven's living existence in the Upside Down and their connection taking first rank due to the magnitude of it's inconceivability.

He put the brick he'd always used in his method on top of the can to hold it down until he set up his killing routine for these creatures.

When it first started happening, Will let them run away down the sink. That was until one started crawling back up a few days later and it got bigger, and he could remember the markings so knew it was the same one. There were a couple that got away because of that method, but he learned his lesson. He'd have to kill every single one.

Eventually he'd found the quickest, least disgusting and by far most effective method before he turned fourteen. A small drop from a bottle of lighter fluid and a match thrown in later had the long leech going up in flames. By the time he did that he was always outside, but he couldn't risk going back out until Hopper left and his mom was happy minding her own business for the rest of the evening.

The bathroom didn't have a fire alarm so Will had to do his best to contain the ignited flame's power from impacting on the fire sprinkler system outside the bathroom.

The squirming leech turned into ash soon enough, having grown no proper skeleton yet and Will opened up the window to scatter them out before his mom could smell the same foul odour that came from killing these creatures with fire.

With that done, Will looked out the window to see in the distance where on the outskirts Castle Byers once was. He could now focus on his biggest secret.

---

It's two in the morning. And Mike couldn't fall asleep for all the effort he put into setting himself up for it.

He found himself staring up at the ceiling, since closing his eyes just allowed him to enter into his imagination, something he plainly doesn't want to enter when he isn't in control of that terrain anymore.

Constantly replaying the telephone conversation he had with his sister earlier on, Mike wondered just how he could get this mess out of his system. This feeling of being perpetually stuck.

His room feels like the wrong place to be and so Mike picks himself up off the bed.

He wants to be where those warm memories began – after long avoiding it.

---

There's a change in the air when Will knows his mother is fast asleep, but he remains as soundless as the world around him allows him to be combined with his efforts to be light-footed around his creaky house.

He adds layers on top of his clothes and packs a couple of more to provide some extra warmth depending on just how close Winter wants to be this early November morning and slides a blanket down into his backpack among his other necessities: a bottle of water, some snacks, and a flashlight. His BB gun is in his jacket pocket, a small and childish weapon that he still holds onto so that he doesn't have to ever find it in an adrenaline rush only to fail.

But Will plans on having more than one weapon. His brother's handmade bat with nails stuck in it from three years ago still sat in the shed and he was planning on making a stop there before he goes out to the marked tree, unsure of what outcome he'll get.

His newer Supercom is clutched tightly in his left hand, hoping that if Eleven puts some strength into it, she will be able to hear him at least.

---

Mike opens the door to the basement and very quietly takes every step down; weary of his parents and little sister being asleep. He turns on the small lamp, bringing the basement to life.

And as always, something feels out of place.

He used to hush that part of his mind, but tonight he was going to have to explore it.

Mike trains himself to relax, to remain collected at least for a little while longer.

The blanket fort had seen better days, slouching inwardly just a little bit more than normal, but it isn't unkempt from over use. It looks as

though no one would touch his small shrine of remembrance dedicated to a secret that much of his family didn't get to know.

While he had accepted Eleven's fate long ago...he could never bring himself to take it down before.

Maybe that had to be the first step, to moving on for good, to letting his time for mourning go. He walked toward it and stopped right before the chairs.

All he had to do was pull it apart. Take away a chair. Let the fort collapse.

Touching the old blanket that made it by definition a fort, Mike caressed the material and closed his eyes.

He could picture himself, younger, still naïve of true pain and being curious but cautious of a girl with a buzz-cut who sat in his clothes and could barely communicate through the traditional social means but who would slowly come out of her shell with time and trust earned and who he would slowly become confused about in ways beyond his understanding.

She had only existed in his life for a week. When he was twelve. And yet every facet of Mike still couldn't give her up.

A shaky breath was given as his pride was consumed by an entity he hadn't seen for a few years. Finally, things began to run free from his tight reins.

In his heart, he still couldn't pull it down – because he hadn't faced it all truly until now.

He let his body move for him, as Mike crawled into the smaller, more cramped space. Legs huddled and hands close to his chest, he closes his eyes and goes through every little thing he kept pushing away.

Mike remembered the last moments he saw her, involuntarily leaving them because it was for their sake – leaving the place that wanted to give her a future but she couldn't accept because the burden of being Hawkins lab Jean Grey meant in that one significant moment, she had to sacrifice her happiness and safety, her future and possibility

for a better, peaceful life to keep those she cared for safe.

The tears start to roll as Mike saw flashes of her face beating the pain into him – the moment they met in the rain as she shivered, cold to the bone – the moment he saw her tattoo, and finally had a name , when he was putting make up on her face and came out in a wig, when blood trickled from her nose when she collapsed after saving his life, the feeling of her clutching onto him as they rode toward a truck that would be flipped mid air over them, the moment she gave up Brenner and called weakly out for him - all up until she stood her ground after being a rag doll for Dustin to carry through the halls of his middle school, pale and remorseful. As she paid her final debt to the Demogorgon, as she said goodbye to him.

All the while, he had helplessly watched on.

---

While in the shed, Will picks up the bat, and swings it around to get a taste of what he's dealing with. Just as he's about to leave, he sees a couple of cans of spray paint and looks at his Supercom.

If his method of communication didn't work, his mom's wall alphabet was a proven medium, and the last resort.

Packing them in his now overstuffed backpack, just fitting the zipper around the lot, he hauled it around his shoulders, and didn't waste time in leaving and locking up.

He turned around ready to head off, when he found himself glued to the spot.

It hit Will, very suddenly, that he was facing his biggest fear. These specific woods at night would never just be nature existing to him ever again. And for the first time since before the Upside Down, he was going back in, straight to what might have been the belly of the beast.

One step after another, Will slowly gained the need to move onward when he kept picturing the warmth Eleven was talking about.

In his fearful approach, flashlight in constant rotation of the woods

around in its untidy state as the elements took control of its wellbeing, Will felt something strangely familiar – a presence. His flashlight landed on the last place he wanted to be, but became a necessary evil to his plan.

The feeling of another presence grew stronger until he could feel it right next to him. Turning on the Supercom, Will frantically went through the channels.

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He had failed her.

It wasn't hard to come to this conclusion often, for his part in all of this.

And while many tried to convince Mike otherwise, he just couldn't see any other way around it.

As much as Mike knew his feelings for her were a big factor in why he still suffered as he did, he also knew it had something to do with his guilt that he hadn't given her other opportunities – that they hadn't left the middle school after the adults and the teenagers ditched them to play their part in getting Will back.

They had just hung around, like sitting ducks, an easy find to the Department people.

And all she wanted was freedom to be a kid and to have a real family and friends, a real connection. She'd had it for a week entirely, much of it marred by her own fears and her own guilt in the Upside Down being brought closer to their dimension, but it was better than being stuck in the lab, forced and tortured emotionally into doing the things she really didn't feel comfortable doing.

Even if she had stayed and they had just been friends after a night at the Snow Ball, Mike would have been elated knowing she finally had her chance at an ordinary life and all the beauty it had to offer her after what she'd been through.

Mike unwittingly begins to sob, tears having already spilt down his old t-shirt. He stifles the sound with his hands, and squeezes himself



tighter, as though trying to console himself.

"It was never fair. You never got to live your life. You gave it up, for us, but I would trade everything I enjoyed about my life if you could be back living yours happy and safe."

---

Growing frustration almost takes up Will's hope. The Supercom is only receiving static – and he knew Eleven wouldn't half heartedly go through with this.

He throws his backpack off his shoulders and onto the ground, covered in the dying Fall leaves. Putting his Supercom on the ground beside him, Will decided to enact Plan a la Joyce Byers. Unzipping the backpack and revealing its contents, he finds the spray paint bottles.

Replacing them with the Supercom now securely in his bag, Will sets off once more, a couple of the cans under his arms, a bright red can being uncapped and shaken up in his hand. He starts marking the ground in an arrow shape, telling her where to go.

The presence is a magnetised attachment now, and Will can feel it pulsing near him as he imagines her walking the same steps as him.

Will sprays onward every now and then when he feels the connection diminish slightly, and when he does so, pulses stronger than before.

Heart racing, Will spots the tree with his flashlight, the bright red X his brother had done three years ago ageing but very much still there.

The presence stops as he does and Will spells out with his green can: "Here", with a mark down to the hole where Nancy once entered into the Upside Down. A warmth envelopes him like his mother's hugs or his friends laughter or his brother introducing him to a whole new world of music and Will feels like it was all worth the past three miserable years if this worked.

---

"I'm so sorry Eleven, I'm so sorry. I miss you so much."

It was the last thing Mike Wheeler uttered aloud that night.

But it was enough.

And the universe began to turn as a tree started to crack.

## 4. Life On Mars

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### Chapter Four

#### Life On Mars

*It's a God awful small affair.*

*To the girl with the mousy hair.*

The echoes of the darkness of this world rang through as it always did. The air was musty as it had always been, suffocating her lungs and bringing her back. Sweetness had simply been present for the briefest of moments before it was ripped away, reminiscent of sharp features, porcelain skin, a sprinkling of small endearing dots and hollow cheeks, she was struck with the sudden sense of fear tingling through her veins, more than second nature now.

Fear that she had picked herself up to leave, only for it to be impossible. That she would be stuck with the consequences for the rest of her life.

Or, that it would work, but it wouldn't end up with her living a happy and normal life, but taken back where she had escaped from in the first.

Sterilised rooms, scratchy shapeless gowns, small cold steel rooms, cats...they had once been the triggers, but slowly over time and without those aspects to surround her here, she was instead stuck with the overhanging tension of grime, of a constant feeling of moist discomfort and dread for the death that laid about haphazardly around her in heaps of the monsters that had taken to feeding on each other for sustenance.

The Upside Down.

Eleven had been stuck here for some time, meandering in the many haunts that the Upside Down had in its own dilapidated rendition from the free world. The one place she felt she could be entirely

vulnerable and safe was the basement of Mike's house, where she'd set up a little life for herself, away from the horror that was the Upside Down. She'd only just perfected it.

Regardless of how she felt about the faceless many mouthed monsters that still roamed the Upside Down, none of those born to this world would touch her anymore, and it had been a long time since a new one would come along and make the mistake of seeing her as food and an incubation chamber for offspring. Eleven didn't understand why at first but she had a feeling it had to do with the crushed remains of the Demogorgon she had entered with after leaving the three people who had willingly put their lives on the line to help her.

When given the unspoken question, Eleven realised that she had still wanted to live, even after discovering her new living arrangements.

Being recollected took its time, and Eleven existed in a black state that she thought was after death, but it turned out to be something she couldn't comprehend. If she ever had the chance, she hoped she might find out just where she'd been in the midst of her body connecting itself back to her life. In reality, it had only been a few seconds but it felt like years.

She had wondered how she would sustain herself and was worried until she came across a sealed box attached to a large tree with a lid and latch to keep it closed, filled with the food that called on her cravings most: Eggos, with other bits from the good dimension. By the time she found it, she was fading in and out of dizziness.

Lucky was the best word to describe that day. The water in the Upside Down was dirty but in desperate measures, it was enough. The rifling for forest mushrooms was not doable for long-term survival.

Will had hardly any energy left to speak or fight for himself when worst could come to worse in the Upside Down, his expertise was in hiding after all. It was both a heavy relief and a selfish disappointment for her that he was nowhere to be found, not a body or any significant pieces left behind like the older girl Barb. And while the bodies from the nightmare of Hawkins were beginning to encase in a mucus' like cocoon, Eleven grew.

The dress she left her friends in was very dirty and stained, tight in areas where she was forced to make rips to stop the discomfort by her chest and waist. She had only managed to keep herself clean through the wipes that were offered in the packages she received, while washing the clothes off her back in a section of the Upside Down's Quarry river. Things had a tinge of green to them because of this desperate method.

That was when she started to get new items, like a breathing mask with a pair of adjustable goggles, books, a toothbrush with paste, a flashlight with a pack of batteries and clothes, all neatly contained in a backpack, not too dissimilar to Mike's. Warm sweaters and tracksuit pants, with several thermals, a pair of tennis shoes and underwear, of which she received several pairs, were all unfolded out on display in Mike's basement.. On top of that, she got a jacket, a lovely dark green colour with wool lining that felt like she was being hugged.

'Mike Wheeler' was scribbled neatly in a thick marker on the back of the printed label. As she outgrew clothes, she thanked whatever force of nature that let her stay small enough in her natural spurt to fit in the jacket.

What had her especially content was finding something within the hidden pocket. A newspaper clipping, and it had been put in a little plastic lock bag. It was about the Indiana State Science Fair, and how the local Hawkins High freshman year kids had come through – to get second place. It was the best they'd ever done though, so it was newsworthy.

None of the words mattered as much as the names mentioned and the photo supplied for the story. It had made her cry for the first time in a long time, seeing them living on their lives with smiles on their faces as they grew up just that bit more than when she last saw them, change visible in their builds, hair cuts and clothes. Will's smile was not as big as the other three – and there was something noticeably different about Dustin's smile as well as Lucas' stance. And Mike's hair had been less a mop and more a mess.

Every night she found herself falling asleep with that plastic pocket with their newspaper clipping, her index finger not far from Mike's face. If she had to take anything to her grave, it would be that

newspaper clipping, tucked into the pocket of the green wool coat, wrapped around her body.

It had her believing that it was him sending her the things, keeping her alive. But that theory came crashing down when she remembered a couple of things about Mike.

He used radios and probably didn't have the funds to send her all this stuff. She never received one message, even just written in the box, and there were no toys that he would've deemed necessary for her to pass the time while in the Upside Down. It was someone else, but she wouldn't ever likely find out who.

Something frightening had occurred to Eleven not long after she entered the Upside Down. It hadn't attracted the monsters as she had suspected but she was truly scared of death by blood loss. There was the frustration and anger at her consequence of life that when she was bleeding out into this deprived version of the Quarry she had snapped a rotting tree in half – causing it to crash in the water and making bigger waves than she could make for her own fun. The blood that was dribbling out seemed to expand with this uncontrolled splash, spreading in the water.

And it would happen, over and over again until she knew this had to be almost normal. The pain that came with it, the extra sad thoughts, more than usual, the murderous intent and occasional action toward the creatures that had been dumb enough to come near her. And the stains of her clothes had forced her to use the soap supplied with her food and clothes every so often – until one day she was given something new.

A box of "Sanitary Napkins" turned up with a new package of food and supplies.

There were instructions on the side and once getting through the flowery language several times, figured out that this was for the bleeding. It took her a few tries before she got it eventually. Eleven felt like she should wear them everyday, but noticed there weren't enough in a pack to last her until whatever it was sent her this. But she'd felt like she could feel out when it was going to happen these days.

It was also in one of these care packages (since they'd gone beyond the bare necessities) a comb came with the soap and a fresh tube of toothpaste with her annual toothbrush delivery. Before this little invention, she used the water from the Quarry to untangle the hair that was growing on her head. She had always wanted it longer, begged Papa to let it grow just a little but he wouldn't allow it for the experimental process. It was hard to maintain with the environment she was forced to acclimatise with, but the sense of freedom it brought her was keeping her sane.

In this rather toxic environment with some anonymous assistance, she thrived.

Maybe it was because of her powers – maybe there was certain immunity to her with overthrowing the queen of the monsters, the Demogorgon. She couldn't know for sure. Each and every day her powers were growing stronger and the nosebleeds were far less.

At first, her powers were proving not to be useful in getting her back. If she could create the link, she could surely make a new gateway. If it was getting anywhere, she didn't know because it wasn't obvious.

She knew the box where she received her food from the better place had to be a small gateway but she couldn't fit herself in whatsoever, even when she was smaller. It brought her to tears with frustration, but figured it was for the best. Eleven knew nothing with intent in the Upside Down was small enough to get through. But rather bitterly, she desired the impossible too.

As a hardened, bigger girl, she was ready to look again. She wished she'd had that circular device Dustin called a compass. It took them to the gateways that existed, which she had dreaded as her stomach fell at this revelation at the time – but now she would do anything for one of those dastardly things.

Trying to go back through the lab was not an option. The utter aversion she had toward the possibilities that lay ahead there never involved friends. It was simply another prison, clean and with bright lights, sterile floors and people who wouldn't give her a break. She couldn't outweigh the benefits over the disadvantages. She wasn't having that. And apparently it was nothing she had to feel guilt over.

One day she went to check as a last resort. It turned out to be closed, at least for now.

At least she had Mike's Upside Down basement to go back to.

She didn't always feel safe there but after she collapsed some of the foundation of the garage on top of a young, overly curious and hungry monster looking into her little nest, killing it severely, Eleven took some measures that ensured she would be left alone, even when she had a torch on to read. It was her heaven in hell and it was filled with her bits and pieces and clothes collected from years of adding to it from the box's supplies.

Over the years Eleven had received savoury foods as well which she had grown to appreciate after discovering that it could have flavour as well as sustenance. As often as every couple of weeks she got a cold slab of meat loaf and a few times she received warm soup in a bottle called a thermos. It was so wonderful to taste warm, cooked food again. And she had received a similar thermos, with warm chunky soup in it with slices of cold roast chicken wrapped up in foil. Always got a lot of bread slices with meat, leafy vegetables and occasionally cheese, depending on the day, as sometimes she got a strange concoction of sweet and nutty with two spreads mixed together, which she always devoured without any hope of resistance.

She had a small stash of Eggos, sitting on a table in the basement for a craving day, having been through three boxes during the last time she bled out, and underneath were large bottles upon large bottles of drinking water, she'd get two each delivery.

Whoever was sending her the stuff was clearly concerned for her, as she now had two blankets to her name.

Food wasn't her pride and joy in the basement, although it did give her some peace after even feeling remotely hungry. But her books were everything to her.

She hadn't had a great ability at reading at the start, but she couldn't be illiterate if she was going to spy on people some of the people who worked in the lab called "Communists". She spoke Russian fluently and could read a majority of it as well as write in the more dire cases.



English to her was very limited but it had been steadily gaining once she convinced Papa – her only victory in that time - to teach her and keep her somewhat mentally equipped so that she could continue to be his useful little experiment but without the independence. Eleven couldn't have been more overjoyed the moment she recognised books in that little hutch of goodness.

The books started off with pictures but more recently she had acquired a book with less pictures and lots more words, but it was very entertaining, with language reminiscent of those boys in the basement not long ago. It was the only thing able to bring her a smile. Eleven was sure she had messed up pronouncing some of the words, especially some of the more complicated ones, but got by as long as she knew what it meant, which was why she very much appreciated the mini dictionary she had and treasured it among most of her "Mike" things.

But she was alone in the world, and she had wished for something of a companion, only to believe that such an idea was selfish. Eleven never wanted anyone else to witness the Upside Down.

One day, after so long of not feeling anything out of the ordinary for the Upside Down, a familiar feeling hovered by her and it was warm. Eleven had managed to make as much warmth for herself in the basement once she blocked off all the seals and started clogging up the basement with light from a small collection of flashlights and battery powered lamps with a horde of batteries that she got every single package not shortly after receiving the first flashlight.

There was something unbelievably overwhelmingly spectacular about this magnetic feeling that was tempting her to touch it. It didn't have a presence or a colour, but it felt golden.

Eleven hadn't cried for a long time, it had only caused her to feel pain in her head afterwards and she avoided it at all costs. Now it was bringing up thoughts of a home that was so short lived that it must have been all but a dream to her now.

When it started to drift away from her, she scrambled to gather some things and follow it.

It wasn't part of her routine to leave the basement at night, which was far darker and more unnerving if she had to describe the difference. The burning of eagerness was hard to suppress however, and Eleven felt like this wasn't a bad thing for the first time in her existence here.

She was led through the area of houses, through to the town and to the vast expanse of forest and woods Hawkins Upside Down offered. Eleven wasn't bothered once during her trip to follow this powerful enigma, the creatures slinking further into the safety away from Eleven upon her arrival to a house that she hadn't come to very often for what bad memories it offered her.

There was no turning back though, and she followed the warmth's connection inside the house. It was torn to shreds in some parts, wallpaper rotting where the creatures caused some of their greatest havoc. The black alphabet letters still existed on the wall, but there was no manner of which to use it to communicate to the good dimension through the lights.

Soon enough, the warmth was leading her into a hallway, taking her all the way to the end and into a room. A bedroom that she could presume belonged to either boys she met briefly, although for the sake of what she could gather from her memory, this was Will's room.

She had taken a seat on Will's bed, until eventually she found herself falling asleep. It wasn't wise to do this considering her dimension, but Eleven had felt safe outside the basement for the first time since she arrived. Nothing could take away this feeling or moment away from her, the closeness that she had desired for so long was finally being fulfilled – even in the most unlikely way.

That was until she was no longer alone.

Eleven couldn't remember how but she just knew something wasn't right. Awaking violently, she prepared herself for a fight.

But she had been taken aback when the creature was smaller, and responded to her call against it of a simple "Don't!". And then as her flashlight, dimmed by wrapping an old shirt from her first year in the Upside Down, which was covered in flecks of monster blood and had

made the light less attractive to the monsters, shone on the intruder.

A boy. Possibly around her age too.

And distinctly familiar – but she was sure she was seeing things.

"Who are you?" she demanded quietly. It hadn't been her best delivery, but she wanted them to know she meant business.

When the boy responded, "Who are *you*?" she couldn't believe the audacity.

"You...answer."

It had been quite some time since she'd had a conversation with another possible human being. Completely confident with talking to herself, but she reverted to newly escaped Eleven in this pretty crucial moment.

"My name is W-Will, Will Byers-"

Eleven almost dropped the flashlight from where she was crouched on the bed.

Suddenly she recognised the young, scared boy in a much older body, and with a deeper voice. It was no longer a question of if. But she didn't have the words to ask how this was even possible.

"Will."

She got up off the bed entirely, hoping to examine the first human being she'd seen in years and hadn't realised how determined she was when she started using her powers somewhat unnecessarily to move the flashlight around the room, shining to emit upon them both. It did look quite eerie to begin with, and he was still scared, especially since he still didn't know who she was.

Once he had better visibility of her though, his consternation turned as his eyes squinted, calculating how this presence had brought something up in him that he couldn't quite comprehend.

All at once, it was as though a thunderbolt struck pure shock into

him, he asked incredulously, "Eleven?"

She hardly skipped a beat.

"Yes."

He said something that from her reading she knew was a "curse" word, not to be uttered unless the event truly called for it. Eleven let it slide considering she thought much the same thing.

Holy shit indeed.

But her surprise transitioned very quickly upon Will doubling over as he began to cough horrendously, frightening her and worrying her over his welfare.

And then, he faded away, as though he'd never been there in the first place.

Eleven was evidently traumatised.

The warmth disappeared.

She needed to leave immediately.

Rushing herself through repacking her bag, she zips it up and hauls ass out the front door, no concentrating on the direction and runs straight into the forest, the opposite way to Mike's Upside Down house.

She doesn't know if she's dreaming or her feet are possessed, but Eleven just goes with it since she's panicking more than anything and concentration is long gone from her mind.

Eleven had taken a break on finding herself a potential exit out of the Upside Down.

And just while she was off guard, Will Byers somehow appears before her.

She tripped on a rock, covered in moss and unseen. Eleven fears the worse, she roughly grabs her ankle.

It's only scraped, and might sting over the next couple of days, but she can stand up and has evaded actual blood, which is more relieving than she cares to freely admit. Eleven might be the Alpha, but she was afraid one of these days, the Monsters might try to oust her by killing her for good.

But they'd never been intelligent enough to think about teaming up. And it was a dog eat dog world in the Upside Down, they were all enemies to each other.

Eleven took a deep breath and sat up. She hadn't done herself any favours by panicking. She's not sure where she is. Eleven can't afford to get lost in this dimension, and it would feel quite stupid if she died because of her own stupid fault, stranded in some part of the Upside Down.

Dusting herself off, Eleven tried to centre her thoughts and feelings and her powers come into focus. If anything with an ill wish against her attacks, she is prepared.

She grabbed her bag off the ground and started to take a couple of steps in the opposite direction, the right direction, retracing her steps as much as possible so as to not lose her path. Her confidence grows as her heart slows down to an agreeable rate.

A whistling noise halts her.

It's in the wind, and carries through a smell that's not so acrid. Her gas mask is shoved in her bag, exposing her completely and she just realises this. Her eyes are wide open and she's thrown into action.

Just as she has it in her hands again, ready to strap it securely around her face...the smell comes filtering through to her nose.

It's a welcoming smell. Not something that could be said of much in the Upside Down, but that's the best way to put it. And the whistling sounds like it might be a break in a seal, like the one she heard coming through the abandoned Bus in the junkyard.

And it feels like...home.

Eleven has to hold back tears, uncertain how to process this strange

feeling.

That's until it takes her mind to where she can recognise it. It smells like the packages she gets, completely untainted from the quality of life in the Upside Down, like fresh air and the woods – the proper woods – the Upside Down makes these woods smell like humid damp, even when it's blisteringly cold.

And out of the corner of her eye, she can see a collapsed Castle Byers.

Eleven's body shivers in a way that says it isn't from the atmosphere, but from some curious revelations.

Exhaustion nearly consumes her at how much has happened in the course of a few hours. She decides to make some use of her powers, other than for killing. Eleven marks her current spot for future possibilities. Two trees opposite sides of each and near the collapsed Castle Byers have bark stripped from them to reveal a much lighter layer underneath.

Eleven doesn't understand what this all means, but having got her hopes up too soon before, and realised she was in a strange and vivid dream once or twice, she heeds her previous experiences and tries not to think too hard on this.

She needed to go home. Her Upside Down home.

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Pacing like the characters sometimes did in her books and like the boys would do often when trying to figure out Eleven's stunted responses thanks to her limited vocabulary when trying to find Will, she was currently trying to explain away the phenomenon the night had been in her head. She completely ignored the "try not to think too hard on this " advice, from herself, with gumption to supply her busy thoughts.

"You're not insane, you're not insane, you're not insane-"

She seemed to chant this over and over again until she forgot how to breathe. Slowing herself down by taking some deep breaths she finally felt what she really didn't want to feel.

Lost.

And so terribly alone.

In those weird hours, she found herself falling asleep only to be completely desolate. There had been a life outside these walls that didn't consist of terrifying monsters, and there had been people who remembered her. It cut to her deep.

She cried herself to sleep, clutching that newspaper clipping.

There was a possibility – and yet Eleven couldn't find it in herself to put faith in it, because she saw herself as a gatekeeper. The monsters feared her, but let loose on fresh blood, and they might become unstoppable.

She didn't think she could risk more lives for a chance of happiness again.

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Eleven almost regretted crying all those hours before. She knew she had to, but she really felt dizzy upon reawakening and a grogginess enveloped her body that she knew she'd have to get rid of somehow.

She decided that just for once, Eleven would wash herself in the house, but not in the basement. It would make too much of a mess. She had used the bath upstairs and used three bottles of water leaving her with ten leftover from her hoarding and her honey smelling soap was nearly running out considering she used it on her hair as well. Eleven had to be sparing in pouring the water, but she found the results to be just that much better than when she used the Upside Down Quarry water.

She took a chance to look in the broken mirror, the same one she looked at when she wore a disguise and felt beautiful for the first time ever.

*"Pretty...good."*

Eleven closed her eyes, cherishing that curious little moment. When she reopened them, she found the results to be rather different. She was different.

Her skin had changed its tone. She'd always been warm looking, and she was just darker than Mike who was like porcelain and winter, or what she'd read about it anyway. Eleven's skin was almost green with sickness, and the dark circles around her eyes that would remain to her death almost made her look a lot older than she actually was.

She knew it wasn't her but what she'd had to work with. And her hair didn't feel like Mike's looked, all soft and shiny. Her hair, while she was glad to have it, made her feel even dirtier. Eleven could comb and comb for days and with assistance of both Upside Down Quarry water and the cheat of the bottled water, would find she was still hiding a nest of knots that couldn't be tackled by herself.

Sighing deeply, she tried not to focus on it because admittedly, Eleven had given up on trying some time ago.

While it's not her craving day, Eleven believed she earned herself a couple of Eggos after the night she had. She kicked the box away from herself in some odd sort of shame, but she had maybe thought it was down to her being sort of useless.

Settling back into her reality, Eleven looks up at the ceiling in wonder. She doesn't attempt to go down the "What If" scenarios. That would just hurt. But she does try to think of new ways to be useful here.

She considered just piling up the death count in the Upside Down so that she could leave without any worries.

But then the offspring would just double and it wasn't a feasible means of keeping these creatures away from human beings.

Eleven couldn't discern much from this world, what with her limited understanding of her old one. She just wanted someone to figure out a way to cut them off from the good dimension, forever.

Little goose bumps started to spread through her body and she could place the feeling better when overwhelmed tears began to prick at her eyes. It wasn't the same as the last few hours and it made more sense when she could feel the warmth again.



This time Eleven didn't hesitate.

She touched the warmth, almost hovering beside her, mocking her cruelly for what she could never have. Eleven almost felt like glaring at thin air, but knew that would do nothing for a possible visitor.

Suddenly, someone started to fade into her existence in the basement, right next to her. She recollected with ease the shape and form of the boy she met the night before.

Will Byers had been clutching himself after what looked like him having a fit.

Carefully Eleven took off her gas mask, knowing it was more of a foreboding sight than a welcoming one. When he eventually looks up and sees his surroundings, he still doesn't seem to notice her.

"Will?"

This time, Will put a hand over his heart, eyes wide in fright as he jumped up in reaction.

But once his eyes look at her long enough, his body relaxes and he slowly retakes his seat. There is a hint of a grin on his face. Monsters can't grin, and so Eleven feels totally safe wrapped up in his existing warmth next to her.

"It's really you, isn't it?"

She held so much disbelief for his person last night, a highly imaginative illusion she'd created in her loneliness that Eleven didn't realise he might think the exact same thing of her. Eleven nodded briefly, a little speechless that this is in fact a real person.

"Is that a gas mask?"

She handed it to him as a gesture of sharing or just generally looking as he seemed intrigued with it and by what she guessed of his analysing the basement, was this version of the Upside Down in Mike's basement. She would never make it exactly the same, but for what she had, Eleven felt she had done a pretty good job.

"You wear this all the time?"

"Yes," she said breathily. Truth was, despite these unbelievable circumstances,

Eleven still wasn't confident enough to talk fully, but her curiosity eventually got the better of her. "How...how are you here?"

Will looked unsure as to how to answer, "I don't really know...but sometimes, when I feel sick – I come back. Only briefly though," he then steadily changes the subject, a little antsy, "Eleven – do you live here?"

She doesn't hesitate to answer that question as she beamed, nodding at her handiwork, and the foundation that the original owner in the good dimension shaped for her, but decides to be totally open if this is one of her only chances to talk to him again, "I feel safe here."

Will seemed to agree, until he was frowning in thought.

"Did you...did you touch me...before I, arrived just now?" Will struggled to phrase.

Eleven didn't know to answer without coming off nuts thrown in with some obsession, because she partly did it thinking this time, it could be Mike since they were in his basement.

Slowly nodding, she replied, "I felt something there...I thought it might be..."

Will nodded. He understands where she's heading and lets her taper off the sentence.

"If you live here, why were you in my bed last night?"

She seemed just as helpless to answer a question of which the meat of the answer is still a strange aspect to her, but the right one. "I felt something...something warm taking me there. Warm is good here."

"Did you feel the same thing here too?"

"Yes, same thing."

This answer seems to set him off on a course of silence as he sinks back into the couch they're sitting on. She gives him a few moments to his thoughts when very suddenly, she feels him take her hand.

Being touched by another human being is what many would see as part of everyday life, but for Eleven it's all she wanted to get by happy in the Upside Down. At first her shock is clear to Will, and he sees that he might've not thought that part through, but just as he's about to retract it, Eleven keeps it in hers desperately. She's grateful Will doesn't tease her for it.

Eleven could barely comprehend life anymore when Will tried to talk to her again.

"Eleven, you can't live breathing through a gas mask anymore."

"But I need it." It was such a mechanic answer, since her head was still pleased with her hand being held.

"I mean that you need to come home."

This completely threw Eleven off her thoughts of the beauty of human physical interactions. Now someone was caring enough to consider her options, and to her face where she could witness it. But then she remembered. She was responsible.

Eleven hated that she felt the tears come up, but she couldn't find the effort to expend her energy it holding her utmost emotions on the subject back.

"I can't."

"Why not?"

It was so simple, so easy. But he didn't know. She pointed at the caved in mess she created when the monster decided to become a peeping tom in her life, possibly after her stash or what her flesh had to offer a bloody thirsty creature. Will visibly blanched at the sight.

"Is it too dangerous out there?" He almost should have said, still.

"No," Eleven whispered, her voice deepening with recollection of any

confrontation from the past three years.

But Will seemed adamant to keep this subject going.

"Then why can't you come home Eleven?"

And that was when she burst open with the whole flat out truth.

"I'm responsible, okay!"

Will looked incredibly taken aback, but there was no way else Eleven could say it. He shouldn't have even come back, in this place that nearly killed him, because one day it might keep him, and that was the last thing she wanted for anybody. It was her hell, and she had to pay for what she'd done. Spliced them, pushing them too close together.

"I brought it here...it killed Barb – it took you." She jabbed her chest with her free hand, a habit to communicate her point easiest when she was selectively mute.

But her other hand was being squeezed, reassuringly, forcing her to look at Will, his eyes filled with an understanding.

"You didn't do that on purpose Eleven. You were just a kid, just like I was...still am. Barb's death isn't your fault either. And I'm still alive because of you. A lot of people would really like you to come back, and if I know anything – this isn't a place for a girl to live, even a super-powered one."

If she were to believe that then she was a goner.

Eleven shook her head, stubborn to her frail cause, "I could bring something with me."

The understanding in his eyes changed, and a harsh knowing replaces it instead.

From his expression, she thought he might have agreed and given up on the mere suggestion itself.

"We'll deal with it when it comes to it."

She is so shocked by his response, by how laidback he is, that her tears stop just for a moment. Her face is crusty with the drying tears and she can already feel the headache coming on, but Eleven knows now that this affair is genuine. She has to deny, before she even considers the possibility.

"No – Will."

"Yes, Eleven. Chances are you won't – that won't happen."

He almost reminds her of her 'Papa' but she knows better not to equate the two. Will had seen what the Upside Down was like for a week without any sort of power to aid him, no food, etc. He was being assertive for her own good. Not his. And he's reassuring. His smile is real. He wouldn't benefit from this in any way.

Eleven decided that unless the person is a monster, never to liken anyone to 'Papa' again. Will sounded more like someone worried than someone who wanted something from her.

"Mike needs you back Eleven. Just trust me on that. And he'd welcome you with open arms, even if a Thessylhydra managed to get out too."

His face came to her mind at the very mention of it, tears running down scared and angry pink cheeks when she said bye. The ache in her heart and the pit of her stomach as she holds onto Will's hand tells her all she needs to know.

Maybe she could go back after all.

"If we're connected El, I want to use this to help you get out of here... do you know if you can?"

Eleven blushed somewhat, an identifier to the information she kept privy from the outside world of the Upside Down. It might be useful now, but it's admittedly dangerous if she ever figures out a way but it doesn't keep the monsters in.

Eleven looked away as she nodded in confirmation, as he sucked in some breath like it was a bad move. When she looks worried that he'll hate her, Will is immediately supporting her again.

"We'll deal with everything when it comes to it. What's important is that we get you out of here as soon as we can. What do we need you to do to get you out?"

Eleven shrugged, being completely honest, "I don't know how..."

Will was undeniably crushed to hear this, but that changed with what she said next.

"There's a spot near your house."

She's not sure if she should continue, until he squeezes her hand calmly.

"It's weak, but not open."

Will took a few seconds to think about this, scrambling his brain for anything significant.

"Are you weak too?" asked Will distractedly.

Eleven almost laughed. It was the first time she was bursting with the stuff in her veins and tingling in her fingertips, ready to unleash some sort of bleeding anger on any monster that didn't know the hierarchy. She shook her head and while she couldn't find the right words for what she wanted to explain to Will, Eleven seemed to eventually make sense when she used her free hand, to stack where she was in comparison to the Demogorgon and how powerful she was now.

Will seemed to look relaxed by the thought that Eleven was top of the Food Chain of the Upside Down. It was then the erratic coughing started and Eleven started to panic – she knew he was sick, but she also didn't want to see him go so soon.

"Follow my warmth Eleven, find the Supercom I left behind in Castle Byers and break open the gateway."

He seemed to struggle to get this out and he was obstinate she understand every word he said. Eleven nodded response and then slowly his head fell forward to let out a wracking cough.

Will started to fade away again shortly after, until she could no

longer feel his warm, soft hands.

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Sitting in silence for some time, Eleven had been stirring in her mind deeply of what could be.

While she knew she had some sense of duty tied to the Upside Down, she'd wondered just for a minute, if giving it all up was possible, that nothing bad would happen. Will had been determined for her to understand that this was not necessary and that maybe she was just punishing herself for something that had been out of her hands even when she created it. And if she could find a way out, she should use it.

Eleven wanted to leave so badly. She wanted to read more books and breathe fresh air, and feel the warmth of the sun on her face. She wanted her Christmas and her summer, the way it was described in books was too magnificent for her to miss out in her lifetime.

But most of all, she wanted to see her friends, and to join a family, if anyone wanted her.

Looking around her basement, she wondered if she was abandoning it, in a strange feeling of guilt. The basement wasn't a living thing, but it was the closest thing she'd had to owning anything of her own machinations in her life.

And then she'd looked to the caved in part of the basement. There was just too much out there to live with, and she found herself craving the attention she felt when her hand touched Will's.

Maybe he was right. Maybe if she didn't have to, she shouldn't have to live breathing through a gas mask.

Conflicted, emotional and utterly exhausted with this existence, Eleven knew this wouldn't be the case if she was in the good dimension.

And for once she had thought, "*Why me?*"

Because she didn't choose to be telekinetic. She didn't choose any of what she did in the lab, she was following rules until it started to hurt others, and then she couldn't do it anymore. Eleven was named after a number, which in meeting others once she escaped made her realise wasn't the norm. Eleven was a weapon and not a person.

And she'd been using herself as a weapon with a brain in the Upside Down for too long.

She was only doing what he wanted.

While her sense of preservation began to kick in, Eleven forced it away.

*"No. This is about what's best for me."*

And for the first time, Eleven felt confident in the idea of escaping for good, for her wellbeing.

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She sprung up from her place on the couch and started packing. If this was the last time she saw this place she wanted to take some things with her, but not everything.

Eleven wouldn't fit everything even if she desired to. She carefully chose what she treasured most and wore what she could on her person. Mike's jacket, the newspaper clipping safely tucked in the pocket was without a doubt coming with her.

She packed a flashlight as usual and some batteries just in case. She grabbed one box of Eggo's just in case and found her overly used mini bottle, pouring in some clean water. The sanitary pads were refilled so she left them and only took one on the chance she set off a fresh flow from what she was likely expending herself to do tonight. Most of what was in her backpack was clothes and books, treasured items while she left some behind.

Supposing that this world was still open, supposing that someone had been dragged into the Upside Down, supposing that they managed to escape and found this place. Eleven wanted there to be food and water, extra flashlights, batteries, toiletries and other necessities to



get by in the Upside Down.

And also on the small chance that this didn't work, there would be everything still laid out to come back to.

Before she was about to leave, Eleven found herself stopping in her tracks.

In a small compartment in the Upside Down basement she stored the very first dress she'd ever worn, ripped, dirty and torn but still very much beloved to Eleven's heart. The flannel too was folded in Eleven's own style and the old shoes sat on top. She grabbed them, seeing no one would have any use for them as they were in shreds anyway, but a sentimental factor kept her from leaving them here altogether.

Once zipped up and wearing a couple of layers, Eleven placed her gas mask on the couch and the goggles next to them. She wanted to leave them behind because she felt that if she took them with her she was allowing the possibility for failure to occur. She'd breathed in the atmosphere for a little while before the box became part of her survival, and it was mostly fine for a short amount of time. Eleven didn't want to set up the idea that someone might enter the Upside Down involuntarily, but she wanted to cover all her bases just in case. A pang of guilt still remained at how closely anchored the Upside Down was to the good dimension when a trip to the Communists in her mind let her discover the Demogorgon in her findings.

But she wouldn't let it fester in her moment of, hopefully, future freedom.

Manually she turned off all the lamps and flashlights left, and went up the rickety staircase to the main foundation.

Her little trek to Castle Byers led her to dissociate too easily, and while weary of what could come out at these weird night hours, Eleven felt herself dipping into the fond memories of her week of freedom from the lab.

The rousing feeling in her gut from what she could be doing now in

the good dimension was enough to push her onward and soon enough she could see Will's house in the distance.

Eleven could always sense when there was a creature nearby, and hadn't let that feeling slip since she caved in the basement window in fright. Swallowing comfortably, she kept her pace; it was wise not to show fear to these creatures, since it made them think they had the upper hand.

Approaching Castle Byers with hardly an inkling of concern, Eleven could feel the goose bumps raising on her arms and could feel the ground shaking underneath her.

She stopped so violently that the force diminished, possibly in curiosity.

Turning on the spot, Eleven stared down a creature she'd not faced before, but saw that it was familiar to one of the lesser ones, but had a couple of more heads. It was scaliier and didn't ooze quite as much as the others did, but she knew she had very little effort to spread herself out tonight. It would be nothing when comparing it to her first monster kill.

She locked herself into her curse and her blessing, as the monster stepped forward and gave a roar.

*Crack, crack, crack, crack, crack, crack, crack, crack.*

It was all that could be heard and seemed to shock the creature into silence.

Eleven broke every single bone in its body, her go to if she wanted to get on with life quicker and without too much of a recovery session afterwards. It screamed in agony, as she expected and while she could have killed it, Eleven wanted a good reserve in her system for this expedition home.

The three-headed creature cried out in agony, but she knew it would have killed her had it had the chance to. With no instruments around to manually end its life, she closed her eyes in some regret and turned back on her heel.

There was a feeling akin to hate and pity when it came to killing these creatures.

They had been brought into a world where they ate each other for sustenance and their one desire for human flesh was dangled in front of them everyday only to have proven to be the worst predator to come across. Eleven didn't kill for food; she had killed for survival and in some sense, to have one less monster in the Upside Down, one less opportunity for someone to be taken if a gateway opened again.

She knew there wasn't malice intent, but when her life depended on it, she would kill them the easiest, and sometimes unfortunately the most torturous way possible.

But she couldn't dwell on the morals for leaving this creature for a slow and painful death of starvation or to be food for the smaller creatures, further down the food chain. Picturing the day she buried Barb in the Wheelers backyard, she knew there was sometimes a way to push down the pity and ignite the indifference.

The screeching torture decreased as she walked away and found herself deeper in the woods by Will's home.

Castle Byers had been destroyed but everything underneath the original basic standing base for shelter was maintained underneath it.

She was careful when picking through the items until she found a very old and crusted up Supercom. It buzzed to life, albeit shakily when she turned it on.

*Find the Supercom I left in Castle Byers. Check.*

She had to wait for a long time by Castle Byers, of which she endured her own anxiety, until she felt the warmth that she'd felt every other time.

*Follow the warmth. Check.*

It was then she started channelling the boy, but knew if she were to use her powers, she was possibly going to weaken herself and sabotage her exit in doing so. The warmth remained, even as the Supercom struggled.

Her heart began to sink. If she hadn't had to injure that monster, Eleven would've pushed some of her powers for this, but she was too scared to if she ended up unconscious and weak and came across another monster.

Somehow, the warmth that she could assume well was Will, had found a different way to communicate.

'Follow Me' appeared in a red ink on the ground and soon enough an arrow starts to form itself in the same ink on the ground. Eleven's heart begins to race. This could actually come through. She drops the Supercom and follows it.

When she starts to feel the warmth straying a little bit, a new red arrow reveals itself, keeping them back on the same track. Eleven's heart is pounding when she finds herself in a familiar area, the same area she had marked only a few nights before.

The two trees opposite each other, with bark stripped in neat lines, don't seem to be the link to the gateway she was looking for. Will continues on spraying and the arrows take her to a large tree a little further away, but right smack bang in the middle of the two trees placement, once she looks back to check.

That same whistling in the near stagnant wind of the Upside Down, the same smell of fresh air, it fires her up and Will is leading her closer and closer with every other step. Until it takes her to the other side of a large tree, where she sees a much older X spray painted on the tree, marking it for reasons that Eleven slowly begins to understand.

A large, gaping hole, a creation of the tree itself is fine until she sees how the Upside Down has taken its toll on it. It dribbles with a sticky, smelly substance and Eleven is sure it isn't going to be pleasant.

Taking a deep breath, Eleven waited for instructions only to see the word 'Here' spray painted on the tree for confirmation.

Pinning her nose closed with two fingers, Eleven enters the hole, and finds herself going in deeper than she thought was possible for the

diameter of the tree, but knows she's heading in the right direction when she can smell the good dimension through the Upside Down at a much stronger sense than before. Finally as though coming full circle, Eleven finds the end and knows what she had to do. The hole is tiny, but it's enough to make her gasp in delight.

And she knows what she has to do.

*Break open the gateway.*

It had made sense when Will asked her if she was weak – only to look confident when she responded with "stronger".

Eleven decided to go slow, she wanted to survive this and so her build up was everything.

Behind her build up was the thoughts she'd gathered over the last 24 hours. Eleven hadn't been so emotionally invested in a year and now her waiting was over. She could eat food anytime she needed to, she never had to look back in fear of the monsters ever again – she never had to wear that stupid mask. She could bathe properly and not have to ration water.

Eleven would see other human beings again and she would never take that fact for

granted ever. She would see friends, and people she could trust.

The warmth that she could sense from her connection to Will was stronger now, the strongest it had ever been and she almost felt herself splitting apart again, and felt the blood trickle down her nose, oddly like an old friend coming back to say hello after some time of it never occurring.

She was screaming but the hole had started to crack and the noise was so deep it that it almost frightened her, but Eleven persisted.

If she died now, at least she died trying.

And that last sentiment thrust her forward as the crack broke the tree and let it fall like the glass of a mirror shattering.

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She was somewhere else now, and it was still dark, but the sense of something crisp, raw and clean was too strong to be anything like the Upside Down. Her senses finally felt the crunch of leaves underneath her hands and she could hear birds flapping their wings and some protesting the disturbance.

*Birds.*

And then slowly, footsteps came rushing after her. She was being pulled out, still uncomfortably attached to the tree, until she felt herself laid out on the cool, wet ground.

"Eleven, oh my god, Eleven."

She could hardly move. Stiff and in a lot of pain and very, very exhausted, she looked up with the most effort she felt she needed for something so normal.

But she could barely see the person when they grabbed her up, hoisting her against them, as weak and lightweight as she was, and held her close. They were wet and wobbly in the face when she caught glimpse and started to see small things that she could identify.

"You're here, you're really here."

"I am," she said tiredly, disbelief and happiness carrying through. "I'm here."

It was hearing her respond at all that had Will's heart soaring. She was back, and finally the universe was right again. Or at least they thought it was.

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*/ = new divider because the usual one isn't working.*

## 5. Don't Dream It's Over

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### Chapter Five

#### Don't Dream It's Over

The wind was all that could be heard in the cold November air. Before the two teenagers, one going in and out of consciousness and the other trying to figure out what to do next, was a tree, split all the way down the middle from the very top. And this wasn't a small tree.

He hadn't quite expected that entrance, but he would never forget the way the ground beneath him rumbled and how the wind seemed to pick up on cue. And then suddenly she was shoved forward, likely her own might of will mixing with her force throwing her out of the tree and into his dimension.

Will hadn't been this exhilarated in so long. He'd been stuck in another space of his mind for

years that helping Eleven had brought him some sense of self again. He almost felt like he did before he met the Demogorgon, carefree.

That was until he felt her go quite limp in his embrace on the wet ground of the woods. Quickly checking her pulse, he couldn't find it. Will cursed himself for not paying more attention like Lucas had in their CPR health class. He pulled away some of her layers and put his ear to her chest. It was still beating – much calmer than he would've thought for what she'd put up with, but he figured that now she was indeed safe, she could let someone else take care of her for a change. And Will was prepared to do so.

Her flashlight was on the ground, still covered in that T-shirt for reasons he would find out eventually. She also had a backpack on, and he wondered if walking from Mike's basement to the gateway by Castle Byers was more of a journey than he anticipated. He rolled her over so that he could remove the backpack and pack the flashlight. He hoisted his own on one shoulder and Eleven's on his other

shoulder and left his spray cans and the bat, his much smaller flashlight in his mouth to direct the way better.

Awkwardly Will sat her up so that he could use her armpits to raise her up on her feet. He wasn't strong but something told him that Eleven wasn't very heavy either. He strained one arm across her back before getting the other one behind her knees. She wasn't light, but he was sure she was meant to be heavier if healthy.

Eleven was probably in the worst shape after her entrance. She'd clearly put everything into leaving the Upside Down, pale in the face with blue bruising in her veins pushing forward to the surface of her face and around her eyes in particular. The blood seeped from one nostril and from one eye too, which was a terrifying sight and had him hauling himself to the house quicker.

Once he reached the backdoor, Will set her on her feet, and struggled to keep her steady while also getting them both through the entrance. Will found that he'd have to carry her like a bride through a threshold again if he didn't want to disturb his mother.

Will supposed he could have woken his mother up immediately, but wanted to get Eleven comfortable and warm and explain some things to his mother before she could be shocked at her reappearance and also angry with Will – because inevitably he would have to be upfront with the truth and that was hard enough already for Will these days.

His utmost priorities resurfaced when he nearly hit Eleven's head on the hallway opening's frame.

Once he had her carefully laid out on his bed he looked out of his bedroom door and down the hall.

Not a stir in the night...not a hint that his mother was awake.

He had some time.

After he closed the door carefully, Will put one of his lamps on and read 2:38 AM on his alarm clock beside his bed. Seeing no sense in sleep while he was far too awake, he decided that for the next 24



hours, he was now Eleven's carer.

He started to peel some of the layers off of Eleven, moving her limbs and sitting her up when it was necessary. She had a jacket, a sweater, a top and a thermal layer underneath, with sweat pants, leggings and checking before he undressed her after the leggings saw a pair of thermals under that too, hoisted up to her hip bone.

Will left the thermals on for obvious reasons and added new layers from his own wardrobe. It had taken some time, but once she was rewrapped with the extra blankets in his backpack, and under his heavy comforter to provide her some ease through her sleep, Eleven's colour began to change, flushing back into a pink despite the consistent green tinge.

He found his notebook on his desk and pulled his seat over to Eleven on his bed. Her breathing was slow and consistent enough for him to relax. Finding a pen somewhere on the floor in his somewhat messy room, Will started to write some notes of importance, questions he had that he hadn't had when he was overwhelmed by their connection.

*Why are you green?*

*Where is your gas mask?*

*(Only if she's willing) What happened while you were in the Upside Down?*

*Who was sending you all the stuff?*

That one seemed to send him off to where he shouldn't have been snooping, but Will just had to see it as it all being for Eleven's benefit. Hawkins Lab, the "Department of Energy" and shifty government characters could have been *keeping* her there and thought made him boil with anger that all they sent were provisions and not help to get her back out.

They were doing the damn near minimum if they were behind this.

Books, and lots of them had explained why her bag had been so much heavier than his. Clearly she treasured this along with the

small dictionary that been thumbed at and folded at the corners at where he assumed were her favourite words. There was a small bottle of water and a box Eggos, some soap as well a toothbrush, a small tube of paste and a pad. The twelve year old in him was screaming to fling it away but then he remembered he was housing a lab experiment girl who had been on the run in another dimension of hell for three years and that he grew up doing his mother's bra and it was unopened.

He couldn't discern much from the books or the other cherished items and when he found a torn up pink dress, a pair of shoes and a flannel shirt that he could vaguely recollect as Mike's and that this might have been the outfit she was wearing when she left his friends, he decided that the next avenue for clues was in her layers of clothes.

Will investigated the clothes that he placed on a dressing table in a pile to clean for her if she felt an attachment to them. Carefully unfolding each and every item, he found they'd all had their store labels attached but that they faded over time and heavy use. It wasn't like these stores had computer systems logging these items and who bought them so Will gave up on that idea.

Until he saw the jacket hanging on his doorknob, wanting to keep it out of his mess for Eleven. It was also vaguely familiar – it's colour a distinctive deep forest green with a lovely wool lining.

Mike had grown out of that jacket.

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*October 1984*

Will had arrived late to their latest D&D game but hardly anyone could complain about it. Mike's campaigns had been just rebuilding in quality after about ten months of some lacklustre stuff. Lucas and Dustin had considered bringing it up when Will very nearly stood up and left their conversation. They realised that Mike was still going through some stuff and would encourage their mourning friend from Will's severe suggestion. After that, the campaigns picked up a little bit more.

And on top of that, Mike was saddled with a small chore in the basement while Dustin and Lucas were helping him. Mrs. Wheeler wanted Mike to fill up a box of old clothes for the Winter clothing charity drive for the church.

Dustin and Lucas had been too busy laughing over some of Mike's old pyjamas, which mysteriously never made an appearance during sleepovers. Mike, somehow smiling through it all was defending himself the entire time, but taking it all in stride.

*"My aunt gave them to me for my birthday – I had no choice but to keep them!"*

Will had remembered the bunny slippers and the little flap at the back with fluffy tail for detail. Dustin had made a point for everyone to hold onto the image of Mike's bunny suit for the rest of their lives and the subsequent small life changes he would have succumbed due to its restrictions in the front.

*"Didn't know you sat down to pee Mike."*

Mike was scrunching up his face in annoyance, but his smile remained nevertheless as he shook his head and three friends cracked up over his mild suffering. Their freckled friend was clearly planning some sort of revenge, just as he was putting in his old forest green, wool lined coat. Every one of Mike's clothes had his name printed on the tags, as Mrs. Wheeler was a persistent woman. Will sort of chuckled to himself at the thought that poorer kids in Hawkins all had items with some Wheeler kid's name on it.

*"One day in your sleep Henderson."*

But his hands came across a neatly folded pair of grey sweatpants and a navy blue sweatshirt. Mike's whole demeanour changed. Neither item would fit him anymore and he seemed to be stuck thinking about where these two items were heading. Lucas and Dustin seemed to notice too and went down route of pretending they hadn't by continuing a different conversation.

Quickly Mike placed it back with the keeping pile. Will frowned.

Before even a whisper left Will in question, Lucas slyly motioned him to cut it out as he continued his conversation with Dustin seemingly. Dustin held up two fingers, parted but not in the peace sign. It was their signal.

It had something to do with Eleven and if they wanted the day to go smoothly then they would let this drop because Mike would get past it in a couple of minutes.

And he did. Later Will found out that Eleven had worn these items almost exclusively until the disguise was introduced.

It was nearly eight hours later, only breaks spent getting drinks and more snacks and going to bathroom, when Will was being picked up by the Chief as the nightfall had swept across Hawkins that Will remembered the interaction. He could just hear from his spot in the passenger seat of Hopper's Chevy

*"You don't mind dropping this off for me at the church tomorrow Jim?"*

As always, Chief Hopper was naturally gruff but decided to be polite all the same. Karen Wheeler occasionally supplied him with home cooked food that she insisted wouldn't fit in her fridge, and reasoned he was such a busy man that it would only make life a little easier for him if he took it off her hands. And it did and almost always, Jim Hopper swallowed his pride and took the offering and Will would witness this often from the passenger seat. While he was no favourite at the church, his position as Chief got him in and out without so much as a question of whether he should jump in the confessional booth for a word with those closes to God.

*"Sure Karen."*

Will watched in the rear view mirror, Hopper put the box in the back, only to touch one of the items, almost in thought. Eventually he nodded once to himself and slammed the door to the trunk closed.

The then thirteen year old didn't think much on Hopper's bizarre observation.

But a fifteen year old was slowly being crushed from inside out.

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Will opened his eyes and shook his head. It couldn't be him.

He stood and walked toward the door, took the jacket from the doorknob and found the telltale sign that he somehow wished wasn't there.

*Mike Wheeler* was written in Mrs. Wheeler's handwriting and a thick marker that had been used on most of Mike's clothes.

Will felt sick to the core, but thankfully, he didn't feel the urge to cough up any of the internal creatures that seemed insistent on growing in his body. No this felt like something he hadn't felt for a long time.

He'd felt like this for his father, who let his mom work to the bone where as he held zero responsibility or care of any sort in Will or Jonathon's upbringing. And it certainly didn't have him speeding down in his Muscle car to see Will in the hospital when he survived the Upside Down.

Just as he was starting to consider Hopper as a missing figure in his life, one that actually understood him and let him be – it was ripped from him. Will looked at Eleven, how much his friends toiled looking for her, how many tears were spilt in that year, Will with guilt that she couldn't have what he had too, Lucas for not being friendly enough with her after he realised the truth and not giving her a chance, and Mike, oh God Mike.

All that time looking, and hoping and failing, and *he* had the answer all along.

Will remained quiet for Eleven's sake, but he couldn't help the angry tears that rose up in his eyes and the sniffing that followed.

What made it worse was the thought that his Mom might be in on it too.

She potentially was due to how close she was to Hopper. How Eleven found him only to be chased by Hawkins Lab a few hours later, with the aim of capturing her and shutting her up in her old life only to chase her straight into near death and the Upside Down.

Will didn't feel at all guilty. His Mom cared deeply for Eleven and he knew that – but if she allowed that to happen – then he didn't know if he could ever look at her the same. He already besmirched the name Hopper in his mind. His part was very clear in this.

Eleven shouldn't have been in the Upside Down for three years. She shouldn't have even been in there for more than a week.

Will knew now that there was no way he could trust any adult with Eleven's wellbeing. They either wanted her as a weapon or buried in the ground.

As she steadily sleeps, he wonders if he's being irrational. If stopping adult intervention might be the downfall of Eleven.

But the chances are in the favour of likeliness that they will just take her against her Will. If he could fear any of the stories told by the guys about being on the run from Hawkins Lab, having vans drive directly toward a bunch of kids on bikes or chasing them through the halls of their middle school with guns would have been top of why Will didn't trust well intending adults with shit. Even his Mom didn't trust them – and had always been very vocal about that.

It's this factor that almost makes him reconsider his Mom's part in this. Maybe it was Hopper had never made a move when his Mom was practically throwing softballs to bait him.

But there was always an "if". Nothing was certain and these were high stakes.

Will couldn't take those odds lightly.

The prospective plans of Eleven's return were changing dramatically, but he was glad he had overanalysed some of her possessions and hadn't made a move too soon.

Soon he was writing a list of priorities in his book with Eleven's sketch beside it.

*Eleven's recovery, welfare and safety.*

*Fake sick. Convince Mom. Get her to go to work despite that.*

*Call the guys before they get to school.*

Deep down Will knew that he couldn't keep this to himself and that he would be causing grievous harms to his friendships if he didn't inform them at least. Eleven needed some familiar faces in her life, and as much as Will was prepared to help her beyond his means, he was sure that having Dustin and Lucas would hasten the recovery process and Mike would keep her from feeling guilty about her part in the Upside Down's existence.

*What makes you think it's all your fault?*

Will wrote that down once it popped into his head through his train of thought.

He closed the book carefully and placed that and the pen on his desk, before leaving the room to get some baby wipes and a large glass of water for Eleven. Will was planning on leaving Eleven alone until she stirred herself awake, but was going to be ready at a moment's notice if she needed anything.

There was still a lot to do but he knew he'd have to get some actual rest in if he wanted to work with Eleven effectively. Living off on a very little sleep the night before and a nap during Gym was not wise if he planned on being useful.

Will created a mini mattress beside his own bed by creating a thick surface via layered blankets and used his sleeping bag to cocoon himself comfortably. He clicked around on his new watch that he received for his birthday last May from Hopper. It's digital and decked out with some of the coolest little things like detection for the current temperature and an alarm. The noise wasn't quite as disturbing in the morning and he had started using it instead of his bedside clock. Eleven doesn't need to wake up from a deep sleep in distress.

And for the first time in years, Will fell asleep with a sense of responsibility greater than him passing through his own fears on the way. It's this aspect of his new way of thinking that made him actually believe he was rested for the uncertainty that lies ahead.

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Will awoke at the mini beeping sound in his watch.

Eleven had hardly been disturbed, having not tossed or turned once. Will would've known as he was too light a sleeper these days not to be woken up by any minuscule sound that brought upon a possible anxiety attack or a slug coughing episode.

Stretching out his limbs and cracking anything that needed it, Will checked on Eleven. She was softly breathing in her sleep, chest slowly rising and falling with the sheets. Will pulled up the blanket a little over her shoulders, and she seemed to tuck herself further in her sleep mode when Will did this.

He was almost so distracted at his pure disbelief that Will didn't hear his mom start walking down toward the hallway.

Sprinting to his door as lightly as possible, Will opened it to his mom halfway to his door.

"Oh hey honey, I was just coming to check on you."

"Uh yeah, thing is Mom, I'm not feeling so hot-"

Will was interrupted when Joyce touched his forehead. She was checking his temperature and looked unsure on whether she agreed with him.

Frowning, Joyce could see the honest desire not to leave the house. She sighed.

"You're not sick Will."

"But Mom-"

"But you don't have to go to school today."

Will was flabbergasted. He blinked a few times, apprehensive to question this decision his mother had made. She didn't believe he was sick, but she was still going to let him play hookey?

"You've been acting a bit off more than can be usually expected sweetie. I'm not blind to it."



"What about school?" he asked absentmindedly.

Joyce smirked somewhat. "From what Mrs. Wheeler tells me, it might be best if you stay home today. Diffusing fights can be a scary thing, Will...let's say you've earned it, like when I used to take you out of school on my day off when you were just a kid."

"Am I not still a kid?"

Will didn't know why he was still asking questions, but when he caught his mom in a conversation as honest as these, Will tried to get as much out of it as he could. Meanwhile, the tingling in his stomach told him that holding his mom back from going on about her day was just prolonging her and make it possible that she could catch the girl in his bed.

Joyce's smile was a little sad and she placed a hand on his arm, before pulling him into a hug. He was a few inches taller than her now, which wasn't surprising when she'd always been short. But she could still feel his vulnerability regardless, her baby boy.

"You'll always be my little kid Will, even when you're in your forties. But I would be remiss to see that you've grown up faster than most."

She never added the reasoning, she never had to these days. It was always just a whisper in their ears when their eyes saw something that wasn't there in the walls and when Jonathon changed the light bulbs in the house whenever they flickered.

Joyce stroked her son's cheek and pulled him down so she could kiss his forehead.

"Now you just rest easy. Do you want to me to bring anything to your room."

"No! I – I mean, I want to watch TV. Veg out on the couch. You know."

His mom shook her head at the bizarre behaviour, accounting it to her reasoning for keeping him home today.

And so Will waited ten minutes while he sat on the couch, mind

racing with thoughts and possible scenarios of how this could all go south very quickly, while his mom brought out some Pop Tarts and a glass of juice. She kissed him before shoving on in her mouth and heading off to work.

"Don't get up to too much trouble when I'm gone mister," his mother said jokingly.

He smiled awkwardly and waved her out, "Yeah, bye Mom, have a good day."

Will needed some acting lessons, but his mom bought it. His guilt ate him up inside, he never liked lying to her since she always would be in his corner to defend him, but he didn't really know what *not* dating Hopper had consisted of this whole time. Had she gone shopping for those same thermals, had she suggested the sanitary pads when the Chief didn't come across Eleven's inevitable puberty crisis in another dimension?

Will swallowed uncomfortably, but decided to give his mother the benefit of the doubt until he found enough to debate it to conclusion. It made him mentally add her to his list of priorities, as she had done day one for him.

#### *4. Find out if Mom is in on the supplies.*

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There was a perpetual ache in being in the cramped position with which he slept. His lips were dried out and cracked painfully. He had a headache for the ages and he was cold. And on top of all of that, Mike Wheeler had panicked his mother.

A slam awoke said teenage boy completely on edge and nearly banging his head on one of the chairs holding up the fort. He must've found himself increasing in the space by spreading out through uncomfortable means, but it still didn't make his small muscles satisfied with his position. Rushed footsteps followed from the door.

"Oh my God, Mike! Why weren't you in your bed?!"

Mike moved from the fort, and turned as his mom finally reached the

bottom of the stairs to berate him for freaking her out, only to concern her more.

His eyes were heavy and puffier than she'd seen them. There was an exhaustion in them that she was worried would happen the day he stopped being her little man. He was paler than his complexion naturally was and looked as though he was done with the world. His voice croaked when he tried to excuse what happened when she put a finger to his lips.

She put a hand to his head and silenced him by doing so as he looked confused by her actions.

There was no rising temperature as she might've suspected, no fever ahead, and yet everything else told her that he was in no good condition. Her shoulders sagged when the decision came to mind and a possible culprit for this manic behaviour from her son.

"I'm going to need you to stay home today honey."

Mike looked taken aback by that suggestion. He didn't know if that was even an option.

Sure he could use the rest. But he didn't want to worry his friends and become an unnecessary burden after he'd finally accepted everything and said everything he needed to Eleven.

Or nothing at all if his beliefs were proven true.

Sure if Troy was back in school, although he highly doubted it because his mother doted on him more than his own who at least had the logic to punish Mike for his actions on every other occasion, it would've been nice to avoid him. Mike's attack that started a rather one-sided fight had been problematic; he took the chance while Troy was too busy lauding himself to the cafeteria as some big bad wolf. Mike could reason that in any tense situation, one shouldn't ever be cocky because it only led to mishaps like this for Troy – and boy he'd had it coming for *years* so that was always going to play against Troy who was clearly not very good at the game of Life. But Troy was also a sadistic and privileged kid. He could get away with being the psychopath who held a switchblade to Dustin's throat while forcing

Mike to jump into the Quarry to save his friend from being badly cut up. He may have been bluffing that day, but Mike wasn't going to take that risk from Troy Donovan who could probably get away with god damn murder if his mother had a say and so Mike didn't want to find himself in a situation where he was alone in an alley while Mike Donovan and his muscle left him unconscious somewhere.

Patricia Donovan was another woman he would gladly avoid too. Troy's conceitedness clearly came from her.

Mike felt like none of that mattered though.

It was the twelfth of November, and he wanted to be with his friends.

Before he could voice this, she suggested something.

"How about I get you a ton of junk food and some pizza for tonight and you can invite the boys over for a sleepover? Just like old times."

Compromise wasn't often faceted in Karen's approach, but it seemed to bring Mike around on the idea. Although it completely blew her mind that he was even turning down a day off from school in the first place.

"Are you sure?"

"I wouldn't offer if I wasn't sure Mike."

Mike rubbed his eyes wearily before caving in. Despite how much he was loathe to admit it, he was overemotional, and while he wanted to move on, which he was insistent he had, Mike wanted a day just to not think.

"Thanks Mom."

She helped him out of the fort and pushed him lightly to the direction of the stairs, a state of worry returning as soon as his back was to her, slouching his way up each step.

Mike stole an apple off the kitchen bench when his stomach growled and watched his sister as she sang to herself some strange little ditty as she ate her cereal at the table. What heaven it would be to be

blissfully oblivious again.

He walked over and drank her juice, which didn't impress her much.

"Mike!"

Mike smiled at his sister and her little scowl – it was nice that not every little thing made her quietly tear up anymore. She was starting to remind him of Nancy now.

"I'll fill it back up Holly," Mike promised.

"Good," she was assertive in her word that she usually had a positive tone to.

Mike ruffled her undone hair, knowing his mother would soon put into pigtails and plaits while Holly was busy eating, and poured her a new glass from the carton sitting on the table.

And for the first time in a week, he started to feel a little better.

His mom walked out of the kitchen and noticed the display at the table but wasn't about to make a Kodak moment out of it, secretly glad Mike was being himself again.

"You're going to eat more than that and you're going to go straight up to your *proper* bed, do you hear me Michael?"

"I do Mom," he said, only looking at his sister as he pushed the glass next to her bowl.

He was sat down opposite his sister and given a bowl of Cheerios save the milk so that they wouldn't be soggy. His mom's kiss landed on his head after he started eating them.

It was about twenty minutes later that Lucas was ringing doorbell and Mike was halfway up the stairs. He heard his Mom answer.

"He can't make it to school today Lucas, he's not feeling well."

"Oh," Lucas expressed concerned, "Is he at least okay after...after yesterday?"

"Well I can't know for sure honey, but if you and the boys would like to stay over tonight I'm sure you can talk to him about it then?"

"Really – even after the fight?"

He could hear the small sigh as his mother responded, likely nodding, "Mike needs the support before he has to serve his Saturday detention."

"Oh," this expression came out more high-pitched. Lucas hadn't been informed on this and was clearly hoping to find out every sordid detail during the car ride to school, but was surprised nonetheless. "Thanks, I'll tell Will and Dustin, Mrs. Wheeler."

"Have a good day at school Lucas," but decided to add as an afterthought, "And try steering clear of any confrontations today."

"Preaching to the choir Mrs. Wheeler," Lucas mentioned honestly.

"Good boy."

The door closed and Mike finished the hike up the stairs to his room. An irritating static noise had been echoing in the hallway but he'd been too focused on trying to hone in his overhearing of his mom and best friend's conversation. It was only when he closed the door he had recognised that sound.

His Supercom had sat on a shelf, gathering dust, a relic of days gone past. He couldn't particularly remember the day they had stopped using them collectively, but Mike remembered never responding to a message from Dustin one day a few months back when it all just felt like too much.

*"Mike, come in, Mike, over!"*

It was Will.

Mike tenderly picked the device up off his shelf. He used his hand to clear some of the dust and pressed the button, and responded.

"Will? Why didn't you just call the phone...over."

A short pause and then a quieter voice.

*"I don't know who could be listening...over."*

Mike's heart dropped. Either something strange was happening – or Will had finally cracked, and the signs had been showing for the latter more than the former. His friend's sudden confidence and fearlessness in facing Troy the day before should've been immediate warning signs, as well as a sudden eagerness that he witnessed last night and the lack of sleep.

"Will...is everything okay?...Over."

*"Couldn't be better. Mike you need to come over now...over"*

It was this strange excitement that concerned Mike more than anything, and Mike with his own mental state, wasn't sure if he should be tackling this alone.

"Okay, but I'm bringing Lucas and Dustin too. Over."

*"Only them Mike, over."*

Mike came running downstairs, jeans undone and a sweater with only one arm in it and his hair messed up from pushing his head through the hole. His mom looked quite surprised to see him doing this after she'd instructed him to stay in bed.

"And where do you think you're going?"

"Will – he's not good," Mike stuttered out, waving his Supercom in the air to his mom as evidence.

His mother seemed to disapprove of this plan. "Mike I don't think that's a good idea."

He was shoving his other arm in the sweater before grabbing his sneakers and a jacket.

"Mom I don't really have time to think about it, he's acting weird, more than normal. He needs me Mom."

Karen sighed uncomfortably, "Look, maybe I should go and check on him."

Mike winced at the very thought. Will had specifically said him and Dustin and Lucas. There was a reason for that, one he was yet to find out, but he figured throwing his Mom into the mix would make things worse.

"Mom, you wouldn't understand, I'm sorry."

"Well then help me to understand Mike!" Her voice had risen from its original footing.

Mike shook his head adamantly as he looked his mother in the eye; "I don't have enough time right now."

With that he opened the front door and took off into the street, dishevelled but mostly ready.

Lucas' car was halfway down the street, oddly stopped.

"I'm going to be late for homeroom Lucas!"

Lucas rolled his eyes while internally worrying about his Cimarron. However much he dwelled on his car's capability, he wasn't ever going to go down easy in an argument of particulars with Dustin. "You didn't seem to care yesterday when we missed homeroom entirely so you could scarf down some waffles instead."

"And your car seemed to work fine just then!"

"Would you prefer to *walk* Dustin?"

Before the curly haired friend could retort, a smacking sound hit the Cimarron at the back and the two looked up into the rear view mirror to see Mike huffing and puffing.

"What the hell?" Lucas exclaimed. He unbuckled his seat belt and got out of the car. Dustin pulled himself up from his seat and out of the window so he could watch what was happening.

Mike placed the Supercom and his sneakers on top of the car and was



buttoning up his jeans and putting his arms through his jacket sleeves.

"Mike, I thought you were sick?"

"That's not really true," Mike said hurriedly while multi tasking and somewhat out of breath, "but that's not the point. Something's up with Will and he needs us."

Dustin and Lucas looked to each other as Dustin said, "I told you he was going to breakdown – we didn't intervene when we should have."

"Shut up Dustin," Lucas commented sourly, although believed he might've been right.

Mike jumped in the back with his Supercom and sneakers in hand and waited for both his friends to get in the car. Lucas revved the engine, and it started smoothly, letting them pull off without too many hiccups along the way after that.

When his friends asked him about the Supercom conversation, both Will and Dustin were growing more concerned as Mike picked it apart.

"Well, if he is having a mental breakdown then we need to be careful."

"But...but what if he isn't?"

Dustin and Mike looked in surprise at Lucas and his train of thought.

"I mean we can't always assume it's a bad thing. Yeah maybe he's a little paranoid, but who wouldn't be after it was proven Hawkins Lab were tapping into the phone lines and bugging our houses," Lucas shrugged.

But what could make Will so paranoid?

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The Cimarron pulled up to the Byers House and the car emptied of

three adolescent boys who weren't certain what they were heading into that morning.

Carefully they approached the door.

"It's open, should we just go in?"

"This is sort of past social rules now, isn't it Lucas?"

Lucas rolled his eyes as Dustin pushed his way in and Mike followed him with a wariness written in his frown.

"Will?!" Dustin called out unconcerned. Lucas hit him on the arm.

"If he is freaking out, we should try being *calm*."

Shortly after hearing that, pounding footsteps were felt vibrating from the floor. Once he came out looking relatively fine through the hallway entrance, all three sighed greatly. Mike pulled him forward, checked his wrists and was close to slapping him.

"Jesus Christ Will, you had us damn worried!"

Will frowned and said, "Why should you be worried?"

But Dustin decided to ignore the conversation once it was confirmed that Will was indeed fine and not going off the deep end as they had dramatically expected.

"Oh thank God now I can go take a leak."

Dustin left the room and headed toward the bathroom and they started up once they heard the door slam shut, wincing at the sound.

"Honestly guys I'm fine."

"Really? Because Mike seemed to cliff dive to the conclusion that you were freaking out."

Will made a mildly amused and confused face, "What the hell gave you that impression?"

"Okay so you're not physically hurt, and you haven't drawn blood

which is another reason why you could have been contacting me," Mike said absentmindedly as he looked Will over. "But you're really happy which we haven't seen in a while."

"So you assumed *I* was going insane?" Will questioned, as though the mere suggestion should've been deemed so.

"Well you have to admit, this is the first time in years we've seen you like this – which we know why, but still, it's not unreasonable that we went straight to the most likely situation."

Dustin could hear the muffled conversation from the bathroom and shook his head. While he'd been blunt in talking about Will's mental state to his friends, he knew that addressing it with much the same manner wouldn't work well at all. He'd finished up and washed his hands. Before he left, he could hear a strange noise.

It was soft and disturbed. Almost like an animal trying to withstand pain.

Once he stepped out of the bathroom to look down the hall, Will's bedroom was the next door down, and the noise seemed to be coming from there.

Dustin looked toward the direction with the conversation and toward the noise and decided to take an investigative look for himself, to see if maybe his predictions were right. Will might have found some injured animal and didn't know what to do with it.

The door was ajar and Dustin carefully opened it, attempting not to make much noise to alert his friends. Looking in, his eyes widened. Was that a person in Will's bed? Had he acquired his own Goldilocks, who now peacefully slept in his bed?

As he took a step inside the room to look closer, the body of the person, a girl, shifted.

"Will?" she quietly asked.

Dustin was speechless since he was sure that this was awkward already and that he had no idea what a girl was doing in Will's room, let alone his bed – and almost stumbled completely.

"No – sorry – I'll go and..."

Her very messy hair fell out of her face as she attempted to sit up. She looked to be agonised over the action but Mike didn't move to help her.

Those dark brown eyes – that nose.

Dustin had seen them somewhere before, in a distinctive part of his life.

Blood trickled from that nose one time too often, a consequence of some of the craziest and most awesome shit he'd ever seen in his life that no one else would ever believe.

"Dustin?"

It brought him back to the present, and slowly his eyes widened even more than he thought they could as she too looked surprised to see him. He backed out of the room cautiously, mostly due to being hit in the face with the most shock since he'd watched the same girl slam Mike's bedroom door shut when Lucas suggested handing her in.

He continued to back up until he reached the hallway entrance and saw the guys still talking. Dustin didn't know how they could be when this discovery only sat so many feet from where they stood asinine talking.

"Woah dude, have you seen a ghost or something?" Mike asked once they caught sight of him

Will turned as Dustin's stare ended up on him. Slowly a smile spread on Dustin's face, the pure shock still there, but an added layer of exhilaration topping it off.

"How...the fuck...Will?"

Lucas threw his arms in the air, "Great, now Dustin's malfunctioning."

Mike's voice was raised in the din of their nonsense.

"You're both acting weird. What the hell is going on Will?"

"Mike?"

The world stopped moving for Mike Wheeler.

Dustin moved out of the way as Will turned to face the new arrival, in every sense of the word.

From head to toe, there were remnants of filth on her, but she was covered in clean warm clothes that were Will's and a blanket was wrapped around her to complete the ensemble of survivor recently found, trailing behind her like some mockery of royalty. Her hair was lank and long and her face was marred by dirt that had recently been wiped away but evidently couldn't be entirely removed from the borders of her face. Will had done so when she started to come to earlier, even as she fell asleep again during the process.

It was past what was unclean – her eyes, a deep brown that had penetrated his soul the same night he found her in the woods, drenched and cold from the rain. She was smaller then, younger, and more afraid. In her eyes was a fear of a new kind that he couldn't quite discern. Possibly due to the fact that he had stopped breathing the minute he saw her.

Mike paled significantly.

He didn't have the words. But Lucas did.

"Eleven?"

Her eyes looked to Lucas with a small smile, as she leaned against the frame, unsteady and weak.

When she looked back at Mike, tears coming up at the very sight of him, she nodded.

With that last blow, the world turned black.

## 6. A Promise

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### Chapter Six

#### A Promise

"Hey, I'm pretty sure you said you would tell us when you secretly befriended cool girls."

Lucas and Will had just carried Mike to Will's bed after he collapsed at the sight of said cool girl while Dustin held up Eleven who was still very weak and was worse when she watched Mike go down.

Will rolled his eyes in response and gestured for Eleven to take a seat on the end of the bed by Mike's feet as Lucas grabbed Will's desk chair to sit in.

Eleven's throat is scratchy and her lips sore from being dehydrated but it's not the biggest thing on her mind as her heart beat wildly at Mike's presence, even if it wasn't conscious. Will seemed to pick up on these smaller things, which while some were visible, a scratchy throat wasn't. Will brushed it off and got up to move around.

He quietly retrieved a glass of water from the bedside table and made his first priority taking care of his houseguest since he had officially crossed off two from his list.

"While that's a very blasé way of putting this," Lucas said tartly of Dustin's observation, "he makes a good point."

Lucas and Dustin both looked at Will pointedly as he directed El to drink, forcing her to take some fluids and she looked grateful for the intake.

Will finally answered their question when Eleven was busy staring at their overwhelmed friend, with a simple shrug. Clearly it wasn't a satisfactory response.

"Can't garner much from that Will."

"Well what do you want to know?" Will asked indifferently.

"Absolutely everything of course," Dustin spoke determinedly.

Will went into a very condensed and heavily edited version of the events that took place before Eleven broke through the gateway. Eleven could understand why Will left some things out that might not have been important in recounting, but she also saw some key elements missing from the story, like the fact that he could transport to the Upside Down through a sickening means and that they'd first met two nights ago.

Lucas blinked dramatically as he read further into Will's casual handling and manner and carefully looked to Eleven to see how she was interpreting his side. Lucas made a noise with his mouth and shook his head, as Dustin seemed to focus on asking questions from the upfront story provided. Lucas cut that off quickly.

"You know more than we realise, don't you?"

Will couldn't immediately think of a way to hide this but explained away the immediate concern.

"So I've known about her being alive since Wednesday night. I couldn't tell you straight away," he defended.

"Why not?" Dustin asked looking quite offended.

Will chuckled darkly, "I've been seeing shit for years Dustin. I figured that my brain got an upgrade in ridiculously accurate and painful hallucinations when I saw Eleven for the first time that night and I didn't have much to base her off of since I only got a glimpse when she found me."

Dustin looked away as Lucas watched Will carefully, knowing he didn't often talk about the Upside Down or its impact on him, to this day.

"Now," Will pushed, "if I'd told you and it turned out to be a figment of some guilt in my imagination, how well do you think you or you or *he* would have coped with finding that out?" Will violently waved over Mike's unconscious body.

Eleven briefly paused staring at Mike as she looked carefully to Will.

"I have enough going on without the possibility of being sent to Pennhurst one day. I had to do this by myself so that if I was wrong, no one would ever know but me."

Hesitantly, after processing this confession, Dustin and Lucas agreed, knowing that had they been in the same predicament, they might've kept quiet about it too until they had some substantial evidence or got her back entirely. What Mike and Dustin didn't realise was that they likely wouldn't have succeeded, not without a connection Will only shared with Eleven.

Lucas turned the conversation toward the only girl in their group, having given Will enough grief for the time being. He didn't seem to send the same interrogation vibe as he'd set for Will, a softness that came to Eleven after she saved him from a Demogorgon and also earned his trust after a few days.

"I can't believe you just turned up after all this time."

He reached out to her left arm and very gingerly touched it, careful not to make her feel anxious, only to swiftly turn it and check her wrist.

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It was still there, plain as day and he gently touched her hand and placed it back in her lap.

"Sorry. Just because you look exactly like Eleven doesn't mean you couldn't have been some super intelligent shape-shifting Upside Down monster who left the original where we couldn't find her to trick us into believing she was okay. I won't pull anything else on you," Lucas spoke honestly, a small curve in his mouth as he slowly started to smile.

Eleven sent him a sad smile in return, which soon went wobbly as she teared up.

Lucas's eyes widened and Dustin shook his head exasperatedly.



"Way to go Lucas, you made her cry."

"No," Eleven denied through a small sob. Wiping at her tears she looked back at them with an expression that told them she was more than worried.

"I hurt Mike, didn't I? That's why..."

They all immediately began to try and explain at once, which might have heightened her anxiety more than assuaged it.

This was an unpredictable phenomenon, but they wished Mike had partaken in the theme, for the sake of the girl who had literally lived under a rock her whole life.

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His eyes fluttered open slowly when he could hear voices. Mike scrunched up his face at the light coming in through the window. He'd had the weirdest dream and his stomach was tightening at the vividness and the fact that he'd imagined Eleven to be back – and older. Maybe he needed to see someone or find a more useful means to get this obsession out of his head, if his experience the night before wasn't enough.

"This isn't your fault Eleven."

Mike froze in his spot. He could feel the extra weight now, by the end of his bed. His heart beat so fast as the reason for all this melodrama flashed in his mind.

"But I – but I –"

"He'll wake up soon, you'll see."

"If he doesn't we can just pour water on him or slap him in the face – always see it in the movies, and I've never had a chance to try it, so this could be a great opportunity."

Mike groaned – if his mind were to play cruel tricks he wished it hadn't have been today of all days. The last thing he needed was for his friends to participate as well.

All the voices went silent as his head turned to look at them on the other side of Will's bed. Lucas sat on Will's desk chair as Dustin sat on Will's chest of drawers, unbelievably calm considering what revelation had just been thrown in their faces that morning, and Will himself was kneeling in front of the person that caused Mike to faint in the first place. Her eyes were bloodshot and her cheeks were glistening with the tears that ran down her face. He sat up against the pillows but still couldn't seem to pull himself away from her.

"Oh good, you're awake," Will said, both relieved and suddenly apprehensive when taking in Eleven's stance.

Dustin scowled in the corner and muttered something about missing out on his moment.

"Are you okay Mike?" Lucas asked cautiously as his eyes darted between him and Eleven.

Mike didn't know what to do or what to say because all he could do was stare at her.

"Well that answers our question," Dustin coughed awkwardly.

Mike swallowed a thick lump of discomfort down. It did nothing to alleviate the pressure in his heart.

It had been torture. Not knowing what had happened to her, whether she was safe, whether she was hungry or cold.

Mike should've been utterly happy. That sentiment was there, but what hit him the most was the wound being reopened because he finally found out the truth after years of no solid answers and being desperately alone in his mind with his thoughts. She sat there, with problems yes, but she sat there, sane and ready to start her life afresh as the human being with eccentricities but nevertheless wanted an ordinary life.

And now, all he could do was cry.

The three boys looked taken aback and Eleven's heart broke all over again.

She moved from her place and sat much closer to him, and placed her hand on his while he was distracted with his tears with his other hand.

Mike gasped a little and watched as she gave him a small, watery smile, which said something more distinctly than could've been put into words for her limited communication.

Softly, Eleven proclaimed, "It's okay, Mike."

It might have been her touch; the cool of her hand sending goose bumps all over and flushing out the heat of building shame that came to so openly crying as a teenage boy. The sincerity of her words and the way she was now carrying herself made his heart swell with pride and a little infatuation was clearly beginning to grow where the root had almost shrivelled lifelessly down.

He moved toward her like a lightning strike but he held onto her tight. Mike couldn't trust himself to believe this for all the physical evidence in the world.

Eleven hadn't quite expected this but was probably the last person on Earth who would ever decline Mike's affections. At first, she had never been comfortable with touch, associating it with the pain or manipulative tactics Papa and his many legions of workers and muscle against her. Affection was a last resort to get her to do something.

Slowly she had discovered that not everyone's touch had a sinister motive and Mike was the first one to let her feel that when she was twelve. A curious regressive period happened when she desired physical affection from well intending human beings after being stuck in the Upside Down, but had forgotten its tenderness, and so Eleven had reacted when Will held her hand, but inevitably she kept it in her own for as long as she could have it.

She'd been wishing for this moment for years and now that she'd got it, Eleven was going to make it last. Her arms wrapped around his neck, which made him squeeze her torso gently as he cried into her hair.

Will gestured with his head to the door to Lucas and Dustin who readily followed him. It was nice to see that Mike was allowing himself to be more vulnerable with his emotions in front of them again, but even they knew when the tension had risen, things could happen or be said that they oughtn't be privy to.

The door to Will's room closed and the resounding click said that they were now alone, but neither one was ready to break their hold on each other.

Mike shook within Eleven's embrace and she could feel her own tears freshly shedding from this magnificent yet openly emotive affair. She was taken in closer to his body so that they weren't so oddly stretched away from each other, Mike surprised by his own strength and Eleven willing to let him do so.

Eleven was back and alive, in the flesh. Just thinking about that stabbed harder at Mike's heart, strangely enough with joyousness foreign to him for some time. His disbelief was diminishing and finally his whole being had soaked in the hard truth.

She may have smelt like Satan's asshole and looked as though she had tunnelled through a monster's oesophagus. She was thinner than he would have hoped for her upon return, and she felt battle weary – but she was back and more encapsulating than ever.

"I will never be able to express how happy I am that you're back."

It was a gentle whisper, an honest opinion of this truly wonderful occasion.

She closed her eyes and sighed happily, "Me too."

Mike laughed through his tears and held her tighter, trying to remain careful of her body's capacity for his intense hug.

But for Eleven, freedom felt just like this.

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They had hardly said a word to each other afterwards, but through absorbing this rediscovery, Mike knew they had all the time in the world now. And Eleven had a lot of healing to do, so conversation

could be declining her immediate progress somewhat.

She wasn't asleep, but her eyes were closed and resting, as she now sat next to him on the bed against the pillows, her head leaning against his shoulder, legs spread out with his.

Eleven was holding his hand and didn't seem to be bothered with this proximity to him, having made her head excellently comfortable on his shoulder after adjusting it. Mike wasn't remotely bothered at first, too wrapped up in bliss, but once he started to delve into old feelings, he could sense a social cue or two trying to nudge its way back into Mike's very spluttered and awkward soul. He just wanted this one non-judgemental moment to be with Eleven without the concerns of the outside world to sink in to question their intentions.

All of it was too sweet and innocent and Mike intended to keep it that way for as long as the world asked for it.

Mike didn't know how long they'd been separated from the guys in Will's room, but he was grateful they'd given them some space too. Having let everything out, Mike was prepared to let himself think of the future, adjusting it to add the potential Eleven would lead, no longer believed to be in the ground or stuck in another dimension.

But nothing could be more immediately concerning than Eleven's recovery. And one of the many solutions to her many likely problems were served in three square meals and clean drinking water. Will had been taking care of that while they were busy silently catching up and Mike could smell Jonathan Byers' take on pancakes. Will had inherited the recipe once his brother left, but neither Will or his mother quite had the same touch as Jonathan did with one of his staple dishes.

Eleven sniffed the air and her eyes shot open.

Before she could even suggest a change in location, Mike helped her up from her spot on the bed, and having watched her struggle to stand on her own for long periods of time, Mike linked her arm through his.

"Hold onto me, El. I won't let you fall."

Indeed she had accepted this request through a shy nod, holding onto Mike's arm as he led her out of the room, now rewrapped in the blanket like some of the old ladies in the old folks home that his paternal grandmother now lived in.

Upon entering the living room and eventually the open kitchen and dining area, the aroma was stronger and Eleven was almost taking off without him. He would've found it amusing had he not realised how desperately sad her situation must've been.

There were places set for five people but there was one at the end of the table where a few dandelions sat in a small vase.

"I picked the flowers," Dustin said with pride.

"They're weeds," Lucas snickered.

"Thank you," Eleven's small voice carried out which made Dustin smile wide.

Mike let her stand on her own for a moment, to pull the chair out for her. Taking her hand, he guided her to her seat, where she shrugged the blanket off her shoulders and over her lap.

She looked Dustin up and down and narrowed her eyes, unable to figure something out. "You're different."

Dustin frowned, unsure how to take this, until he realises that there is the unavoidable condition he's had to deal with most of his life. He smiles and responds easily.

"They grew in," he points to his mouth with a grin. "About a year after...well, you know."

"Didn't make you any cooler," Lucas said with a smirk.

"Says the guy who turned up looking like one of The Village People first day freshman year," retorted Dustin smoothly to Lucas.

They began to bicker before Will whistled them in to the kitchen to help.

El smiled at the familiarity and started to analyse the bigger differences from what she remembered of them where she can see them from her place at the table.

They're all much taller, but Will remained the smallest, just beating her out in height. Dustin is the broadest, but Lucas looks like the fittest of the lot. Lucas' hair has grown only so much, retaining much of the shorter style she could recall him having, and Dustin's curly hair was a little longer than she could remember. Dustin liked to wear baseball shirts now and the hat he used to wear isn't on him today. Dustin wears a lot more denim too. Will has transitioned the most since she met the small boy in Castle Byers. He wears darker clothes, possibly to match the burden, and takes after Jonathan in his clothing choices, currently wearing a white band tee of The Cure. His hair is less of a mop and more of a well intended mess.

She could say the same for Mike. While his style is very reminiscent of her first days with him, endlessly simple jeans and a thick maroon sweater (that Eleven liked the feeling of underneath her finger tips), his hair is also no longer a mop and a consistent mess, with wisps going this way and that, most of it gently swept out of his face to one side in eager manipulation to make him look less like a child. It looks so touchable, but there's something holding her back.

Had she not caught him unawares, she would have seen more of a seriousness that was only attached to an angst-ridden teenager, which made him feel like he was totally out of bounds to Eleven in some new way she hadn't thought of until this urge to touch him.

It would evaporate now though, his handsome thinking face, when he realised she was staring at him.

Mike blushed deeply and his heart thundered when she smiled sweetly at him. This did nothing to calm the feelings she had about touching his hair.

Dustin and Lucas walked out with utensils and condiments to see this exchange and while Lucas rolled his eyes, his grin remains, and Dustin tries to hold in his snorting laughter.

Will came out last and carried a large plate covered in a pile of

steaming pancakes. Eleven's pupils practically dilate at the very sight. Will places them in front of her plate and takes a couple off and straight onto hers with just a spoonful of butter dolloped on top and pours the syrup on them for her.

"I know they're not Eggos, but they're homemade, and I figured you could do with trying some other breakfast foods now that you're back."

Eleven doesn't seem to hear him as she's too hypnotised before she picks up her knife and fork and starts cutting into them. The others watch her with baited breath and see her swallow the warm pancakes with a satisfaction they will probably be lucky never to feel.

She closed her eyes in bliss. Mike looks at the others and sees a similar pain he feels. It's been too long since normalcy has been a paradise in their lives, seeing it as a chore to get on. Now that's all they want for their extraordinary friend.

When she opened her eyes again, Eleven doesn't hesitate to half stuff herself. She would like to fit in, and most days she would've recalled dinner scenes from books and how behaviour and manners was such an important aspect but all she can think of is "food is here, it is good." It's this minor shame that stops her briefly and she looks at the boys, who are all sort of mesmerised and sad. She thinks they might be disgusted with her but they are far from it.

Eventually Lucas speaks up.

"There's no way you're ever leaving us again Eleven."

Dustin is the first to start his pancakes after her, and just as eagerly tucks in because they want her to feel comfortable. She relaxes when Mike is the last to grab a couple leaving about three more on the bigger plate.

Eleven had the last three all to herself.

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They had all gathered in the living room and Will has brought out Eleven's bag with her permission. Dustin and Lucas eagerly rifle



through it on the floor in front of the couch where Eleven sits with Mike.

Despite the curiosity behind the items Eleven obtained while in the Upside Down, Mike only has eyes for her, albeit discreet side eyes and careful glances. She's drinking hot cocoa, after Will found some leftover and Dustin insisted that Eleven try it despite her looking overwhelmed after several trips to the bathroom thanks to Will's incessant need for her to drink as much clean fluids as possible. There's a pink tinge to her cheeks now and she's still wrapped up warm.

Dustin comes across something he probably shouldn't and tried to slip it back away for Eleven's decency when Lucas tugs at whatever Dustin is trying to hide. Both are incredibly crimson while Eleven hardly blinks at its sudden appearance.

"Oh...right...well at least we know you're healthy," Lucas struggled to speak.

Mike's pulled out from his Eleven reverie when he hears this uncomfortable conversation.

Dustin slapped Lucas' hand but Mike saw what he held in it just seconds before. A pad.

While Mike was sure he would normally react like an immature boy, as he had when it came to Nancy and her feminine hygiene products, to which she'd simply roll her eyes at how predictably 'douchey' he'd been about it, this was too entirely sore to question.

Eleven was on her own when she got her first period. And that thought terrified him.

Lucas was right, it meant that the Upside Down hadn't impacted on every aspect of her health, but that didn't mean she wasn't frightened nonetheless. From reading enough health books for early Sex Ed classes, and venturing into the girl's side of the book, Mike understood a little more than he let on. But Eleven didn't even get that opportunity. He was sure she would have struggled without some help, without some instruction once she got her supplies.

What Mike didn't know was if the blood had attracted whatever lived in the Upside Down to her whenever her time came around, if she feared it even more because not only didn't she understand it nor could she stop it, but it put her in even more danger than just living there did.

The thought of already just coping in that environment and adding blood thirsty monsters made Mike grab Eleven's knee and made her look at him. She picked up her pad and asked timidly, "How is it healthy?"

While Lucas and Dustin looked severely uncomfortable, Mike seemed to push aside any of his own, and despite being pink in the face, all he could picture was Eleven freaking out and totally alone when it first happened.

"We don't know enough about it because we're male and they don't teach us much about it because of that fact alone."

"Yeah, but maybe you could talk to Mrs. Byers about it," Dustin mentioned casually. "All we know is, is that it's actually normal and has a lot to do with your reproductive system."

"Re – repro – repro what?"

Now Mike was alert and glared at Dustin.

"On second thought we'll leave it to Mrs. Byers."

"Leave what to my Mom?"

Will had just come in with the pile of Eleven's clothes that he'd collected, throwing one with an aged bloodstain on it immediately in his laundry hamper.

"Explaining..." Dustin couldn't find the word until he gestured down below, "All that stuff."

Will looked deadpanned.

"You found the pad didn't you?"

"Yeah."

Will looked to Mike who was blushing scarlet but he didn't think it was due to the *scarlet* nature of Eleven's system, or rather the rest of the stuff that came along with it.

"Look, as much as I'd like to get my Mom involved...I don't think it's an option."

They all looked immediately at Will with furrowed brows.

"But your Mom is like the best person to be involved," Lucas admitted, "She knows everything."

"Maybe more than we ever did," Will sighed, only to receive more confused frowns and decided it was better to explain as he gestured to Eleven's stuff.

"It's great that Eleven had all this and a constant flow of necessities. It kept her alive. But it kept her there. It kept her secret which was the guy's intention."

With that Will grabbed the jacket next to the pile of thermals and layers.

Unceremoniously he threw it at Mike who caught it in surprise. Before he could protest Will's awful memory when it came to Mike and hand eye coordination, his eyes were glued to the jacket.

"This...this was mine."

Eleven tugged on it lightly and said, "My favourite."

Mike couldn't help but grin.

"Well that's a huge coincidence," Lucas said moments later.

Mike had it in between him and Eleven now only for Eleven to go searching in the hidden pocket and pull out a plastic sealed pouch.

She handed it over to Mike. He paled once he saw it and slowly looked back up at her. She seemed a little sheepish but honest.

"Kept me going."

Dustin's eyes widened once he caught a glimpse of Eleven's plastic pouch item and saw the newspaper clipping of the four boys at the State Science Fair. Second place was a minor tragedy for them but this was hitting all new feelings.

"Jesus Christ, whoever was sending El this stuff knows us."

They looked to Will for an answer.

For once he could provide it and he hated the feeling whenever it came into his mind, but Will knew that he couldn't pretend that this was okay.

"Mrs. Wheeler asked Hopper to take the box of Mike's clothes to the Winter Drive at the church near the station, two years ago. I remember because he looked at the clothes for a moment, maybe for too long which makes him highly suspect, before we took off home."

"He never took them to the church," Mike said quietly in thought. The original atmosphere of curiosity and happiness deflated quite quickly upon crossing this revelation.

"And my Mom could be potentially helping him...hence the pad."

Lucas hadn't looked so furious in years. "We looked, for nearly two years...El...we honestly believed that you were dead...we gave up."

"And he let us."

Mike let this slip. His face was much the same of painful memories and new, angrier feelings as it had been before he beat up Troy, but there was a dagger that struck at his core at the ultimate disloyalty of one of their own, someone who knew the truth, knew their struggle at her loss and met Eleven before she was gone. He didn't have any anger toward Joyce Byers though, something told him that her utter despise for the lab and their treatment of Will's "dead body" and Eleven's upbringing was irrefutable. The Chief of Hawkins Police on the other hands had been sketchy at mentions of Eleven over the years. He'd figured this was a discomfort for him to talk about because he was rough and everything that masculinity had ever

dreamed up, sans dead daughter. But he was beginning to see things that made it more likely to be him too.

Dustin's head shot up from out of his hands, holding it up originally due to the sheer bewilderment that was this day and realised something very sharply from memory.

"Oh god, oh god, oh god!"

Alarmed they all looked at Dustin.

"It was Hopper!"

"Yeah that's kind of what Will just told us," Lucas said unbelievably.

"Not what I meant!" Dustin rolled his eyes and shook his head. "He told them where we were that night, at the school, when El defeated the Demogorgon."

"Lando," Mike said as it all became a lot worse.

While the four were absorbing this new realisation from their earlier revelation, Eleven was the only one who didn't look entirely let down. She'd taken the jacket into her lap and was touching it tenderly as she put the newspaper clipping back in the pocket.

Eleven understood that she had been betrayed, but she knew the same man did it for Will. There was no other reason for Hopper to have sent them after her, the boys reactions were clear that he cared or was enough of an adult to look up to in this situation that it just hurt worse.

But he kept her alive. He sent her food and books and all the things that made her feel that little bit of hope in the Upside Down. And Eleven wasn't one to judge others for their actions if they ended up paying their dues too.

It was time in the lab that showed her this. Papa was trying to get results, fame and some legitimacy in his field, draining her of life without thought. Hopper was trying to save a life, even if it cost Eleven's, a girl who'd created the mess to begin with. But he was paying it forward, every second day for the last three years.

She placed her hand on Mike's and he looked to her, still a furrow in his brow, but the tension receding into himself, maybe to undertake later.

"I know you're upset...all of you," Eleven shakily began as the three others watched her now.

"But...what he did...the stuff he sent me..." Eleven took a few seconds to think. She'd never spoken this much in front of anyone before, but couldn't find another way to get her point across.

"-it kept me going...made me want to live..."

"But you were in the Upside Down," Dustin spoke hesitantly.

"Better than the lab," Eleven said strictly. "I was...the same...with those monsters...equal. In the lab, I was nothing...it was worse. I should thank him."

The anger that was felt, dissipated immensely, but Will still held onto the possibility that caused him to distrust his mother and potential father figure in the first place.

"But he shouldn't have hidden that from us El," Lucas explained, reigning in some of his emotions.

Dustin squinted as he had to question the necessity to keep that information confidential when the four boys had proven themselves capable in one capacity or another when it came to the original incident.

"Why though...why did he keep it secret all these years?"

"Guilt, I suppose," Mike answered bleakly, and squeezed Eleven's hand. "Doesn't mean I'm not pissed at him, but it's an explanation after attempting to send a twelve year old to a lab to be nothing more than a weapon."

"That could be it..." Will spoke quietly, eyeing his friends warily. "Or it could be because they're still out there, waiting for Eleven to come back, and Hopper is helping to keep it secret until the time comes... were she to return."

Eleven hitched in a breath and clamped her hand tighter around Mike's whose eyes went wide at the sudden pressure. She was spiralling at the mere image of being dragged from the house, heavily sedated with needles full of liquid she despised and taken back into that lab.

Her finished mug of cocoa in her left hand shattered and her breathing was erratic. If anyone still had their doubts about her, the small uncontrollable display of telekinesis was enough to bring them to the present.

"Eleven!"

"Probably not the way to go about that sentence buddy," Dustin tensely yet sarcastically spoke to Will.

"El I'm so sorry," said boy apologised profusely.

Mike had her forcibly facing him and was telling her quietly and calmly to breathe in and exhale slowly, repeatedly. It got through to her at some point as her watery eyed troubles started to leave her, watching as Mike instructed her, with the three others in the near vicinity.

"No one is going to take you El, you got that? I won't let those people ever get to you again and that's my word," Mike said with a committed intent. She hadn't seen him this certain until now but was caught on his saying.

"Word?" she blinked uncertainly.

"My promise," Mike swallowed, almost remembering the same instant in time he'd explained that specific word to her years ago and failed her in its meaning in the end.

But Mike was determined not to let that happen again now that he had hindsight.

"I promise it won't happen again."

"We won't let it happen again," Will reaffirmed amongst the group. Eleven was shaking her head rejecting the idea that anyone should

get themselves involved again after the last time, after what she had dragged them through as she started to tear up again.

"But if it's true-" Eleven choked.

"Then it will be dangerous," Lucas surmised perfectly. "We know that well after you flipped a van over our heads in '83."

"Unfortunately we've got about three years invested in you, El," Dustin joked. "And that's a lot of time wasted if we didn't plan on helping you now."

Her heart swelled to know that she wouldn't be alone again, and maybe the assertive affirmations from them had brought her to see that they were of their own minds at the end of the day. She didn't need to frighten them into this with a slammed door.

They were Eleven's friends, and they wouldn't stand to see her back there now that they understood her inside and out. They chose this path, regardless of what it may bring.

"We promise to keep you safe El, no matter what that takes," Mike reiterated, strong-willed and insistent as the night he pulled her into the school halls and out of harms way.

Her watery fear turned into that of a smile blessed upon her by whatever substance of spirit had brought Eleven something so good to her in these boys.

She wrapped her arms around Mike's neck, the broken glass of the mug cascading awkwardly from her lap onto the floor, but Mike didn't seem to notice. He was tinged pink by the gesture second time around and in the open, but took it in stride, pulling her closer to him as she seemed to whisper one last thing.

"Thank you Mike."

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*Going to make this a weekly/bi-weekly update from now on, since I've returned to my studies.*

*I'm going to keep the chapters to around 5,000 words, which is around*



*how many words this chapter is, since a lot of the first chapters were all background information and really hammering in some character and foundation for the plot. There will be a lot more dialogue and pace now that it's really going.*

*Hopefully this will be a finished story before season two starts because I will be barely functioning on the 27th and during the month after that date.*

## 7. Pretty In Pink

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### Chapter Seven

#### Pretty In Pink

Three of the teen boys were sat at the dining table and were immaculately planning out how they would cope until they knew for sure that the Department Of Energy were off the trail for Eleven for good. Lucas, with his English notebook, was dictating and throwing in suggestions or possible obstacles where it was necessary to question plans while Dustin saw most of the priorities with Mike chiming in now and then. Will only had one thing to say on the matter.

"No adults. We can't trust them."

Will was essentially too busy helping Eleven in the bathroom while she showered and scrubbed away any last remnants of the Upside Down from her skin, Will handing her a rag that he didn't care about and would probably throw away afterwards. Will couldn't not notice Mike's forced features, but he was clearly unsure as to why he was specifically helping Eleven after Mike had been the primary person during her week in '83.

And Will wasn't entirely sure why he hadn't let Mike take the reins, but there was an odd connection still tied between him and Eleven, and she had reciprocated his help as though it made some sense to her as well. He knew it wasn't of a hormonal nature...Will had established that it was the opposite after years of denial. But they had something that felt too natural and comforting that the possibility of her being naked didn't freeze him up like it did Mike.

As the bathroom steamed up with warmth and Eleven drenched herself in hot water after years of cold or lukewarm water to wash with, clearly enjoying the experience more than Will had anticipated, he sat on the toilet with the lid down and started writing more immediate needs for Eleven in his journal. She needed some new

items that weren't tainted by the Upside Down and so threw out (carefully asking her as she showered because he didn't want her to feel like a total child) her old toothbrush, her soap and her terrible comb and found a spare toothbrush that his mom bought in bulk on sale at work. There would be more to add to a growing bill of items but Will knew he had the funds for it.

Mike had readily taken Eleven on as a hidden basement tenant in the decision making since it was too risky to let her stay in the same house as Will's mom and with Hopper often coming inside and being of the suspicious nature would clue into Eleven's presence. Lucas had pointedly said of the arrangement, "That was too damn easy."

Mike's petulant blush remained and Eleven was just so pleased to be in Mike's house again, she hadn't noticed the teasing.

Eleven turned off the water and squeezed her hair of the density from the water still clinging within the strands. Will had a towel for her ready, holding it up and looking away entirely so as to give her some privacy. Something had told him that her lack thereof in the Lab and being the only human in the Upside Down made her entirely too comfortable with being naked as it wasn't drilled in from the beginning through social rules and the ensuing embarrassment many felt in her situation. But he wanted her to have it anyway, give her back some agency in the matter.

She knotted the towel by herself and Will hand dried some of her hair as she took a seat on the toilet. Will took his mother's hairbrush from the cabinet and carefully brushed through. Once he was finished with as much as he could get through without hurting her or breaking the brush, most of it looked silky but there were places he was sure she'd have to get it cut.

"You're going to need to get this cut, El."

Eleven grabbed her hair from his hands and vehemently shook her head, refusing the option. "No, no, no, no, no, no, no, no."

It was a pain in the ass to deal with but she had loved it.

"Eleven, you can't keep it like this."

"No, no, no, Will, I-I-"

A sharp knock at the door rang out and Will opened it carefully. Mike stood there, eager and had a small frown on his face.

"Everything okay in here?"

Will sighed and said, "She's got matted hair Mike. I suggested a cut. She's not happy."

Mike seemed to understand immediately. "Can you let me in?"

"As you wish," Will said, almost waiting to be amused.

"El I know-" But Mike stuttered and paused in his tracks.

Eleven had water droplets dotted on her skin still, skin with very little flesh but she wasn't to the bone which would have been a far more upsetting sight and her hair was slicked straight from the brushing. Everything suggested that she just looked like anybody else straight out of the shower, almost a drowned rat with aspects of fresh cleanliness to her, looking less green after all. But Mike felt himself go further into his mind at the very minuscule covering in comparison to once before.

Eleven looked relieved to see him come to her aid but was now also confused about his visage.

Will coughed, disrupting Mike's thoughts and said, "Mike, her hair is the issue...not the towel."

Mike turned to glare at Will, who was only biting his lip with a delicious amusement he never got to delve into. Mike sighed and rid himself of all the invasive uncontrollable thoughts his age had brought to him and looked at Eleven carefully.

Finally he was able to approach her without being a teenage mess.

"El...I know how much your hair means to you...and we're only going to cut so much of it off, so it can be healthy again and then we can...we can make it pretty, traditionally or conventionally. Either way you want it, it's still yours."

"Really, Mike...it'll be pretty?" Eleven asked quietly, with a warmth in her heart as she imagined it as such.

Mike blushed, as she directed her hopeful smile to his already sheepish face.

"Yes, really pretty."

Something told Will that Mike thought she was pretty panicking and near to tears straight out of the shower but he wasn't about to ruin this moment.

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Will was busy repacking Eleven's stuff into her backpack in the living room while the guys continued to plan. Eleven, now dried off and dressed in whatever Will found that would fit from his mother's closet just listened carefully, wondering where she would be in the next 24 hours.

"I know we can't involve most of the adults in our vicinity...but surely there is someone we can trust with this?" Lucas asked the group.

Admittedly, they had struggled the last time in hiding Eleven for a week as kids. They had more hindsight now, but it would help to have at least one person who was technically an adult to make covering for them a more legitimate cause.

"Nancy," Mike said without any hesitation, "She would be in our corner."

Dustin shook his head adamantly. "The phone lines were tapped last time, remember? Unless you have some way of communicating Eleven's return without directly saying her name or describing who she is, that's too much of a risk."

Mike scowled as he thought about this. He was annoyed he hadn't considered creating some very obscure codeword for this exact situation, or for the one his sister had been anticipating if Eleven were to return and the problems that could come with it were then possible.

Will had been wise not to mention Eleven over the radio waves too, but they were going to have to be even more careful.

"We've decided you need a codename El, and would like you to at least be at the liberty to choose," Lucas said politely.

"Codename?"

"It's like a secret name – so only we know who we're talking about," Mike explained with a small smile, "You can choose whatever you want it to be."

"Oh..." El said brightly before frowning having come up blank, "I don't know."

"How about Yoda?" Dustin asked, "You've got the force after all."

"Which someone listening in will clue together," Will said without losing a beat from his spot, still packing.

"Weirdo?" Lucas supplied only to see Mike shoot him a dirty look.

"Ease up Wheeler. I say it with platonic affection this time."

Mike rolled his eyes at Lucas' thinly veiled teasing before finally Eleven spoke up with her own suggestion.

"Eggo."

"That probably fits...and no one else is going to catch on," Will backed up with a small smile, only for a frown to appear immediately, "except maybe Hopper."

"If we're using the Supercoms, Hopper won't have a way to communicate with us either way. Our number one concern is the Department of Energy people. They won't get the reference."

"Unless they do know it because of him," said Lucas warily.

"As much as I can trust Hopper as far as I can throw him," Mike spoke candidly, "he probably wouldn't go into much detail. It's like pulling fingernails to ask how his day was or if he thinks the weather is

agreeable."

And Mike would know, his mother grumbled about it often.

"Have we come to a consensus?" Dustin asked and reluctantly Lucas went in on the affirmative.

"Eleven, we're strictly sticking to Eggo from now on in radio conversations," Dustin instructed with a light smile.

Will knew the house had been debugged several years ago and Hopper was vigilant in checking over the years but when it was brought up, Will was their guide in pointing out what they would look like if they found something odd in his home. His mother would ask him occasionally about a new thing in his room or in the bathroom to check if he had in fact bought said item due to this new anxiety-inducing aspect of their lives. Nothing had come of those incidences, but Will was glad that his mother was just as observant.

Joyce Byers had to be trustworthy...but there was the niggling doubt, eating away at his nerves when Will pictured his mom admitting to helping the Department of Energy, confronting the hardest betrayal of them all.

"It's as clean as it will be," Mike said honestly, both relieved and yet wary.

"Over the next few days, you have to keep checking," Dustin said seriously.

Will nodded tentatively.

Eleven was ready, her hair dry and put into a simple bun with Dustin's very slight ability with hair ties, scrunchies and their uses from a few gigs babysitting, and wearing Mike's jacket with some thin knitted fingerless gloves to keep her icy hands warm while still having some use in her hands.

Mike heaved a small cotton drawstring sack filled with Eleven's Upside Down clothes over his shoulder to be washed elsewhere. Mike and Will had spoken about everything they needed to do next, and while Mike would have rather burned everything that came with her

from the Upside Down, knew it might hurt her feelings or give her the wrong impression at least. Will had put in some new books, which he had no more use for into Eleven's collection, which filled up most of her bag now with added bits and pieces. The mini dictionary they'd found had been the highlight of the whole collection, dog-eared pages for words she must have found difficult or finally understood a concept from their world before she left it.

Dustin took the backpack and the five left the house, desperate not to leave a trace of Eleven in their midst.

While Will locked up, Lucas' trunk now carried more than a spare tyre, jumper wires and a small toolkit, as Dustin and Mike dropped the heavy items inside.

"Hey wait a minute," Lucas said suspiciously, which put everybody on edge, "What about the gateway?"

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All five, after a small pact during the planning process to never split up if they didn't have to, went to the place Eleven found herself in straight out of the Upside Down. Dustin shivered as the wind swept itself through the trees, causing the leaves to dance and the cold breeze to whistle slightly.

The same whistle couldn't be heard that day as it had for Eleven hours before. This wasn't harmonious, just eerie.

"Holy mother of God."

Dustin's words spoke volumes for the rest of the group.

Eleven had been frightened of the possibility of bringing something in with her from the Upside Down. She didn't realise that concern transferred through to her powers, making this gateway no longer a feasible option.

It was hanging by a stubborn thread from the root while it was split dreadfully down the middle. So fragile, that it swayed more dangerously in the wind. But the hole was still held together right down the root, being held by that thread over its girth. It was a feat



of magnificence, however much it brought them to consider that there was still a way.

"We need to finish it off," Lucas firmly. "Cut it down...make sure that El's intention is absolute."

"And who would you suggest do that?" Will asked with a disbelieving snort.

"I don't know, but if we don't it could become a hazard."

"As much as that's true, there is no way either of us can chop the rest of this down without probably dislocating something," Dustin admitted.

"Maybe we could call in a professional?" Lucas suggested, growing frustration at the lack of

helpful ideas.

"Oh no, no, no," Mike threw himself into the conversation, completely objecting the idea, "You bring a logger here, they'll be asking questions as well as asking for money which we don't have a lot of between us. And this might not technically be on Byers land, so the government would be involved then."

"And they might just send Department of Energy under the guise of professional lumberjacks," Dustin heaped in.

The arguing continued on and all four seemed too enraptured in how to deal with this, they hadn't realised that the job was being taken care of.

*Thwack!*

A heavy cracking sound followed the small, but distinguishable noise as the guys stopped and turned to see that the hole had been ripped apart and straight down through to the root. The split wasn't clean, but it did the job as the large tree that was probably thousands of years in existence was defeated.

Once both sides started to fall over, Eleven was still standing

relatively close. Too close.

"EL!"

Mike ran forward and grabbed her, pulling her away toward them, with a strength he didn't know he had.

Just as they reached the group, they felt the earth shattering momentum that was a heavy tree falling over in the woods. Dead Autumn leaves shook, splinters raised and there was a crooning of birds wings flapping manically, as well as many voicing their dislike of this disruption to their day.

Dustin's mouth dropped open as did Lucas'. Will was still quite shaken from being physically shaken by the ground and Mike seemed to only focus on Eleven. She had fallen against him and he was forced to hold up some of her weight, as she stood unsteady in her place. She was responding fine but she looked quite weak and gray again.

"I got rid of it."

There was no blood dripping from her nose, which concerned Mike, since it could have been an internal impact instead.

"Are you okay El?" Dustin finally asked through their shared shock.

Eleven nodded as she looked over them, their worry clear as she leaned heavily on Mike. "Hard..." she said honestly, though pointed to her chest as she clearly said, "Stronger now."

Lucas looked apprehensive however, uncertain that this was all it took to break a possible gateway. He nudged Dustin and said, "You got a compass on you?"

Dustin frowned and then started to look for his house keys within his pockets, where a mini compass was attached. "Always keep one handy - on the off chance a bulb flickers."

The group gathered around to see the result, to see if Eleven's gateway was gone for good. The little gadget took a moment to find its bearings, naturally putting the five on edge, Eleven watching the others to gauge from their reactions how bad this could be.

Finally, it hits true north.

An unbelievable Mexican wave of relief flows through the four boys and Eleven sends them a small smile, hopeful once the last appreciative eye raise hits Will, the three boys opting to close their eyes gratefully, muttering their thanks to the unknown factors that left them in peace.

"Well, something actually went okay," said Dustin, an inflection to his upbeat tone.

Eleven almost fell after readjusting herself in Mike's embrace, post telekinetic display. Lucas grabbed her other side and put her free arm around his shoulder, hoisting her up properly onto her feet.

"We'll celebrate when we get El to safety," said Will, looking around himself and still paranoid that there was more than the monsters to be worried about.

"Good idea," Mike insisted.

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Eleven sat comfortably in the middle of Dustin and Will in the sofa like back seat of a car that Lucas drives, while Mike is pushed into telling stories to pass the time heading back to his house by his friends. From his comfortable spot in the passenger seat, he delights her with the tales of Dustin snorting milkshake out through his nose while on his first and last date, and Lucas screwing up his knee playing badminton in Gym class two years before. He'd cursed so much from the pain that the teachers were in disbelief.

The only girl of the group had felt truly part of it once more as Mike would stop to occasionally explain something every now and then for her own clarity, and the others had their input to contribute as well. Eleven loved the way Mike told stories though, it was probably the most animated she'd seen him positively since she'd come home, as he was quite reserved otherwise.

His third little story comprised of Will being bombarded by an eager Jennifer Hayes at a party they went to in Freshman year (which meant the first year of high school as Mike had detailed quickly,

which had been last year), and one of the only parties all the boys were invited to, in which she kissed him and he stood entirely frozen on the spot. She promptly ran away and Will's mouth fell open at the bizarreness as they all tried to register what happened. Naturally the boys had reasoned that she'd shocked him so much, that he couldn't properly respond to being kissed by one the "cutest" girls at Hawkins High.

Will was smiling in good humour, but heat had risen upon his cheeks.

Eleven should've been paying more attention, still stuck on the thought of the gloriously silly act that was kissing, and something that she understood by dictionary definition was exactly what Mike did to her at that table when trying to explain what she was to him in asking her to the Snow Ball.

Not quite a friend, more in fact, definitely not a sister...but something that involved that level of intimacy.

"El?"

"Hmm?" she was brought out of her reverie when Will lightly tapped her.

"We're here Eleven."

She looked up and realised that with the exception of Will, everyone else was out of the car.

"We have to be quick. We'll drop your stuff in the basement and get you out of my Mom's lame clothes," Will reiterated for her memory of the plan initiated before they left the Byers house.

"Right," Eleven croaked out uncertainly.

He helped her out of the back, and saw Mike waiting for the two of them. "Lucas just went off to his place to get his Supercom with Dustin," he explained carefully, watching as Will still held on to Eleven, who also hadn't noticed.

Eventually their hands dropped and Will went around to the trunk, which Lucas had already popped open for them before rushing off to

his house.

"You sure your mom's not home?" Will asked absentmindedly, grabbing Eleven's stuff.

"Uh...yeah, she should be out since its Friday."

Mrs. Wheeler did participate in quite a lot in the small town of Hawkins since Holly had gone into proper schooling. It helped pass the time when she got bored which his father had shockingly advised her to do, and highly encouraged it too. Today she would be at the Hawkin's Mothers Book Club.

Eleven was blissfully taking in her surroundings, so familiar and the scent of vanilla was beginning to welcome her. She could just picture the touch of soft, cuddly vanilla scented washed sheets that she'd been wrapped in all those years ago.

When she looked up at the house her heart swelled. The Upside Down version had been a home away from home, or what Eleven had imagined it to be in the real world.

What she would do to live here forever.

"Should be, or will be?" Will asked carefully, bringing her back to the surface of the situation at hand.

Mike frowned and added for emphasis, "*Will be*. Why do you ask?"

Will had a little smirk on his face, due to his friend's slightly defensive demeanour. "We don't *exactly* want her finding you sneaking into the house with a girl, let alone Eleven, while she knows she's meant to be out."

Mike had caught on to what Will meant and his neck and cheeks flushed hot. "I'll just say she's my lab partner or something mundane." He stuttered this out and scratched the back of his head erratically.

The telltale signs had all been there, although Will could easily define this as first stage Mike who could still talk but was clearly flustered by the thoughts Will had put into his head.

"It's not like she's going to care..." Mike's sheepish muttering trailed off as Eleven stood right next to him and looked to him with worry.

"Will you be in trouble if I stay here?"

"No! No," Mike insisted eagerly to her suddenly wide eyes. "It'll be like last time, but with a lot more hiding. And even if my Mom knew, she wouldn't rat you out...she'd want to help you..."

"Mike," Will spoke uncharacteristically, his mere threat against the idea embedding itself stiffly in the atmosphere around them.

"Of course I wouldn't *tell* her," defended Mike hastily, taking Eleven's hand and pulling her calmly along as Will followed, a large smirk returning as he watched Mike slowly digest that he'd just taken Eleven's hand with so much confidence that he was now not sure how to remain so.

"Her car's not in the driveway...it could be in a garage..."

Mike ignored Will's observation as he unlocked the front door and walked straight in, Eleven still attached to his hand, though being careful to stand behind him. She wouldn't dare herself to come out from behind him, as he stood half a head taller than her and he called out.

"MOM?! MOM!...HOLLY?!"

"Now you're just being pedantic."

Mike glared in Will's direction as his shoulders hunched in defence.

"Your six year old sister hasn't been left alone a day in her life Mike," Will said honestly.

Mike's narrowed eyes caved in to the thought and nodded eventually in agreement. Eleven let a little snort out at the odd spectacle she was witness to, like something so casually funny in the dialogue of the books she read.

Mike's heart skipped a beat at the sound. He turned to look at her, almost pleased her presence was a constant now. Her smile grew

sheepish.

She wondered what other things she'd learn from Mike that books maybe couldn't give her a full scope of.

Will's eyebrow rose at hearing Eleven sardonically laugh for the first time, but he had to stop himself from rolling his eyes at Mike's practical awe at the very instance she laughed without feeling any sort of disentanglement to another time in her life.

She hadn't been back 24 hours and it was clear he was falling for her all over again, although whether he'd be willing to see that early enough to act upon it was a problem for another day.

Will shook his head at the hilarious absurdity that such a stress inducing time could bring, and moved past the two.

"Mike will have a ton of new books for you to read, to learn more about the world and whatnot," Will spoke casually as they followed him to the basement door, "Educational stuff and fun stuff – maybe we can sneak some of the Nancy Drew books past your Mom, Mike?"

Eleven's eyes lit up and a new, more open smile broke out upon her lips, "Nancy Drew?"

"You've read Nancy Drew?" asked Mike, pleasantly surprised.

Eleven nodded vigorously, "The Secret of the Old Clock and The Hidden Staircase. I didn't know there were others."

It was the most she'd spoken without any awkward or breathy pauses. Memorised and loved deep down that it fell from her tongue like a well oiled conveyor belt of pronounced sounds, finally tumbling with grace from her lips. It was getting easier for her, and they had begun to notice too.

Mike caught himself simply staring at her again, absorbing everything that he knew of the Eleven of his past and the Eleven he was learning more about in his present. He never responded and while Eleven understood why sometimes, she didn't right in that moment.

"There are El," Will decided to step in when the silence was growing too immense, even for his tolerance. "Tons of them. Mrs. Wheeler named Mike's older sister after the character, right Mike?"

Mike stuttered again for a moment before clearing his throat, almost making himself come off deeper in his voice the second go.

"Yeah...yeah, Mom loved the Nancy Drew books growing up and insisted Nancy be a Nancy...when she was born I mean...it's not like she came out the womb wearing a name tag and someone thought it was best to change it..."

Will closed his eyes as he realised Mike was losing his cool. Folding his lips inward to hide his very amused smile, El watched him carefully, as though Mike's explanation made total sense to everyone else and she just didn't necessarily understand it from her perspective. But he hadn't made the effort to explain it to her in the way he had when telling stories of his friends for her to fully comprehend. Eleven figured maybe it was because she was staring at him. And Will seemed to be struggling not to laugh at this rather dismal display of old friends catching up again.

"Okay...I'm going to drop this down in the basement – you two should head to Nancy's room," Will broke the silence, once again. He ushered Eleven toward the staircase. Once she took the first few stairs and turned the corner after the break, Will looked back at Mike, highly charmed.

"I have literally never given you a softer low ball through the entirety of our friendship Mike."

*"Shut up Byers."*

Mike followed Eleven as Will sent one last derisive smile before taking Eleven's stuff down to the basement.

Reluctantly, Mike took the stairs two at a time and eventually arrived at his sister's room, where Eleven stood in a similar awe as she had three years prior, but it was littered with a sense of happiness. All the pretty things she could be surrounded by again, all the feminine aspects of teenagers splayed out in lilac and pastel pink patterns on



her quilt and old photographs, in teddy bears and that one poster of Tom Cruise she acquired in '84.

And then there was that bleak reminder in the shape of the strip from a photo booth, where Nancy and Barb had their small, content moment, before it all disappeared.

Mike figured that Nancy had to leave it there, that his sister might have other photos in her Columbia dorm, or that she didn't want any grieving thoughts attached to her time studying interstate. Whatever his sister's reasoning, he'd wished she thought to take this one telltale photo out.

Eleven's fingers carefully grazed the strip of black and white photos, an upheaval of a sigh slowly overcoming her shoulders like a wave of fresh guilt.

"Hey," Mike spoke quietly.

When she turned to him, her eyes looked heavy and weary. Even if Mike knew they would have to eventually speak about old grief, he knew they probably didn't have much time, nor was he sure he could back through that after earlier that day,

"We...um...we should try finding you some clothes."

Mike directed her to the closet, opening it and revealing the vast array that Nancy's last five years in fashion had to provide for someone of a completely different height and girth. They would have to make do, clearly, but Mike knew that it would only lift Eleven's spirits if they managed to pull something together that Molly Ringwald would envy. Or what teenage boys would perceive as such.

Mike looked how Eleven felt, overwhelmed and a little afraid, although both emotions had very different motives.

"Okay. We have to find something that will fit..."

He started to sort through the stuff on hangers and slid them across whenever his nose wrinkled with displeasure. His sister used to dress quite conservatively feminine considering her robust personality, but Mike supposed that was partly due to his mother's influence earlier

on in her childhood.

Eventually Will made his way up and looked between a ruffled Mike, who was perplexed by his sister's wardrobe and Eleven, who was just so inexperienced that she didn't know how to help.

Sensing her insecurities, Will pulled her forward and sized her up.

"El's not going to fit in most of Nancy's clothes."

Mike turned back to look at him, a small glare deep on his brow. Will figured Mike had already discovered this.

"Unless she has any baggy pieces we can work with?" he attempted to assuage everyone's concerns.

Mike's eyes narrowed in thought for a moment, only for the phone to ring on Nancy's bedside table. The old pastel styled dial phone heightened everyone's anxieties once more, and carefully Mike scrambled to answer the phone without sounding quite so flustered.

"Hello?"

*"Oh my God Mike, what's happening? Mom was freaking out after you left this morning! Is Will okay?"*

"Nancy?" Mike said befuddled, uncertain as to how he could answer every single question at once.

*"Who else? Is Will okay? Do I need to get Jonathan home?"*

"Will's fine –"

"Don't tell her anything!" Will harshly whispered and gestured his head toward Eleven. Mike conceded and turned away to continue the phone conversation with his panicked sister.

"Look this isn't a great time Nance–"

*"Isn't for me either, I'm running late to a class but I thought I would call just one last time before I left."*

"Oh okay...well everything is fine."

"*Promise?*"

"Uh...well...there is one thing..."

"Mike!" Will shook his head vigorously.

Mike held up his hand carefully and said, "I have a bit of a...Weird Science thing happening here...I was wondering if you have any clothes that are too big for you lying around in your closet."

"*Weird Science thing? Like a school project?*"

"Yeah?" Mike spoke odd, which had Will slap a hand to his face. His friend could at times be the most unconvincing actor in the history of schoolboy liars, worse certainly than Will had proven to be under pressure.

Mike also should've known his sister wouldn't have seen such a geeky movie, even if Robert Downey Jr. was in it.

"*Right...well Aunt Bridget sent those hand me down Levi's Cheryl grew out of and I'm sure there's a couple of oversized shirts if you look hard enough.*"

"Jeans or shorts?" Mike said hurriedly.

"*Jeans...Mike what the hell are you doing for this project?*"

"No time to explain – last minute thing."

"*You never do this stuff last minute...are you sure you can't just tell me?*"

"Certain Nance – it's going to be a surprise...a surprise grade," he quickly corrected when Will eagerly gestured about the room in the background. Eleven had moved closer to Mike during the conversation and sat on the bed listening carefully on the phone. She knew to be quiet. But it was nice to hear Nancy's voice again, even if it was through straining her hearing to focus on the call alone.

"*Mike, is everything okay?*"

Mike was about to answer his somewhat disturbed sister, when he realised Eleven was right beside him and he looked to her, her very presence again a testament to what the brilliant reinvigoration he'd needed for some time had felt within him.

"Yeah...everything's real swell Nance."

Eleven smiled at hearing this, even if she wasn't looking at him, still carefully directing her ears to the phone to listen in.

*"Jesus Mike, something's definitely up. That loving sounding voice? Swell?"*

Mike stopped himself from rolling his eyes and focused on the time. "Point is, you don't have to worry...I promise."

A deep sigh echoed across the phone line and eerily to both the listeners. *"Okay. If it isn't, I'll find out."*

"What will you do? Come home and interrogate me?"

He could practically hear her fears dissolve and her smirk return to her features, as she responded: *"No, I'll just junk punch you instead."*

Eleven's brow furrowed, clearly unaware of the term as Mike could practically feel the pain of the last time someone punched him that way going all the way up to his stomach...probably a couple of months ago from Troy. His sister had never done it, but she often threatened it as a means of getting her way.

But whatever was to come from Eleven's return, he didn't want to be on his sister's displeasure and how she would act upon it when she would too discover the truth if he had any say in the matter.

"I'll try and do things that don't worry you then," Mike said hurriedly.

Her small snort told him Nancy didn't trust his word.

*"Maybe if you prove you're not as reckless as you have been the past 24 hours, I'll actually believe that."*

She hung up soon after when it was clear that her being any later would have her locked out of a classroom for the one class she

needed for that day.

Mike gave up on being polite about his sister's stuff when he realised they had little time, communicating what his sister offered as to appease to Will's very paranoid senses to hurry up this process.

Eleven sat awkwardly on the bed when Mike pulled out the old dark wash Levi's Nancy was referring to on the call and saw his cousin's initials stitched into the seam. They would just about fit and if they looked baggy, then that was probably the fashion anyway.

"We'll roll them up," Will insisted when he looked at the length, comparing them to Eleven's legs.

"If there are any belts around here that would be good for holding them up if they're a little too big in the waist."

Mike probably shouldn't have been so surprised at Will's intuitions when it came to girl's clothing, considering he grew up with just a mother and no father to restrict him from that ability and knowledge. But it occasionally had him question certain things he'd picked up over the last couple of years.

Then again, Will was artistic, and considerate. It was no doubt a better help to have him assisting Mike in this very small endeavour for Eleven and didn't necessarily define anything very particular about him, but it occasionally nagged in the back of his mind.

"My Mom might have something...and I think I found something along the lines of a shirt."

After laying the jeans down on the floor, he paired the red and white striped top above it and nodded. "It will do. Now let's just hope Eleven fits into it, even with adjustments."

"Um...is that all?" Eleven asked carefully.

Mike and Will both looked up, confused.

She didn't look remotely unappreciative, but rather unsure.

Eleven was holding her arms around her chest in a protective way,

but also in a way to conceal them. Will seemed to catch on before Mike could even follow his train of thought.

"Mike," Will quickly turned to him, "maybe you should go and get a belt and I'll finish up here with El."

Mike frowned, still very out of the loop and a little peeved by that, but followed along at Will's insistent eyes and the ticking clock. He figured he could also grab the stash of allowance he'd saved up too in his room on his way back.

Once the door clicked behind him, without hesitation, Will pulled out the bedside drawer filled with Nancy's underwear. Eleven was set for underwear specifically but lacked in material upstairs. And where Nancy had little, Eleven had some more.

Will sighed and, looking mildly uncomfortable he asked, "When was the last time you wore a bra?"

"A long time ago..." Eleven said with uncertainty. Time was rather skewed in the Upside Down, but she'd outgrown the bra she wore that was also sent to her as it had become rather painfully small. It was easy just to avoid it in the Upside Down but for some strange reason, Eleven felt quite insecure about it now. It didn't help that Will was awkward too, but she knew it had something to do with how the boys originally reacted when she tried to change in front of them.

Will was dismal at the thought of Nancy's bras, going through them and finding out that none of the leftovers fit, nor would they likely fit. But with some light and striking pink poking through the pastels and whites of Nancy's bras, Will had some inkling that this bra was never worn.

He pulled it out and saw a cup larger than Nancy's natural breast brought back to memory. Will was also certain that it was just too big for Nancy's small figure in general. He couldn't figure out why Nancy would own something quite so racy, but also wondered if it was an option within their limited supplies.

Eleven had pulled on the jeans to see that they fit where it counted and would be secure with a belt and Will was grateful that she was

thinking ahead for time's sake and managed to do so discreetly while he wasn't looking. There was a strange barrier of trust gained from their connection.

Taking the pink bra to Eleven and holding it up with some difficulty to her chest, he asked,

"Could you hold this up...against *them*, and see if it feels like it fits?"

Eleven lifted the sweatshirt she was currently wearing only somewhat and with the other hand, pushed the bra up and against her chest. She smiled somewhat, which had Will sighing gratefully.

"Alright, seems to be the best we have right now before we can get you some new clothes. Are you okay to put it on?"

She nodded eagerly and as she pulled off his mom's sweatshirt, Will carefully turned around and got the red and white striped t-shirt off the floor. When Eleven had the pink bra in place, arms through the straps and covered where it mattered, she grabbed the shirt from Will and shoved it over her head quickly.

Will had bent down to roll up the cuff of the jeans up and shortly after went to find a pair of shoes Nancy hopefully got in the "too big hand me down" selection from her cousin Cheryl. After picking apart pretty pairs of ballet shoes and the occasional boot in her shoe trunk, he found a pair of Chuck Taylor high tops in a dark, and yet well faded blue. They'd been used, but they were likely comfortable and wouldn't bring the wrong kind of attention to Eleven.

Brenner and his men would likely not be looking for some brunette teenager dressed like an actual teenager, but looking for the mess that she had originally come as from the Upside Down. From what he could see of her current ensemble, things were going to be just fine, as Mike had insisted.

Will instructed her sock covered feet into both and tied her laces firmly together. Overall, she could get away with it when her hair was fixed properly. He really needed to get some money for that.

He moved up to adjust her shirt so it fit her better when he realised

that the bra was still loose on her and under the shirt.

"Is it not on properly?"

Eleven shrugged, looking sheepish as she said, "This isn't like the one I had back there..."

Will nodded thoroughly and gently turned her around as he lifted the back of her top up. Now he could see where she might have become confused. This *contraption* was not for convenience but mainly for appearance. Will was beginning to think that the people who designed these bras were sadistic.

"Okay, I think I've figured it out. Hold up shirt for me please?"

Eleven did as she was told and funnily didn't feel flustered with Will helping her with something she had perceived to be intimate whereas it felt quite so whenever Mike became flustered around her.

However neither had accounted for Mike's sudden return, with a belt in hand, some cash stashed into his pocket nor the Supercom held up in his hand with panic in his eyes.

"My mom's home! We'll need to go out the..."

That panic soon changed to something very different.

Will couldn't yet figure out Satan's idea for a bra clip and Mike still had a full show of (admittedly covered) breasts belonging to Eleven, who after having read enough could tell this was against the usual convention between girls and boys. It was confirmed when Mike slapped a hand to his eyes and his face turned as blush pink as the bra he could see Eleven wearing loosely around her chest. It was possibly a shade darker than that.

Will pulled the striped shirt down from Eleven's grasp and over her exposed area and knotted it tightly at the back to fit her form better and to keep the awkwardly loose bra in place. He moved to shut the door quickly when he shook the two out of their very uncomfortable space.

"What do we need to do before your mom can catch us Mike?" Will



said with a frightening determination in his eyes.

Mike swallowed, eyes closed and Will couldn't tell if he was trying to erase this moment or savour what would be his very first time seeing a girl unrelated to him in a bra. Hoping it was the less perverse, he jolted Mike twice and reiterated their very pressing matter.

"Nancy's window," Mike stuttered.

"We go out the window?"

"Steve used to do it all the time...pretty sure Jonathan came through that way once or twice too."

Will stopped himself from rolling his eyes and tried to snap Mike out of his very solidly uncomfortable teenage habit of fighting between decency and having lurid thoughts about Eleven suddenly rush through his mind.

"We'll process this later. C'mon!"

Eleven pulled her jacket on and Mike picked up again on the urgency as Will pulled up the latch on the window and with some help from Mike, heaved it up to get through. Eleven wasn't one to be bashful or ask questions in a state of panic, so she didn't wait when ushered through the window and onto the roof of the garage.

"*Hurry up! Over.*" Dustin's voice echoed from the Supercom from Mike's hand. He stuffed it into his jean pocket.

Mike moved to be in front of her once out the window and had momentarily forgotten what had just happened as he took her hand to keep her balanced on the slanted roof. "I'll help you down."

Being the tallest, he dropped onto power box below with ease and some well-timed precision. With some help from her powers she landed on the box with him softly. He had her in closer proximity now and was beginning to feel the heat from before rise up from within as she looked up, feeling quite beset by what had occurred. She was half a head shorter than him and he thought that was remarkably cute despite this very excruciating playback of her. Mike swallowed a very confronting lump in his throat. Why was he so

uncontrollable and why hadn't he knocked?

Luckily Will was there to douse this set of symptoms with figurative cold water of worried words.

"Guys I need to get down!"

Mike leapt lightly from the box and to the concrete path next to it and helped Eleven down again, despite how little she needed anybody's help in such a scenario. As Will's feet made impact with the power box, their hands dropped away from each other.

They picked up speed when Lucas spoke through the Supercom: *"I'm parked behind you on Kerley. Over."*

Mike headed the small group on pounding feet and Will looked back to check on whether Karen Wheeler was more sceptical of her son's whereabouts and curious enough to check the loud sounds from the power box. She hadn't been fazed quite enough to discover them sprinting away from the house, which Will gave a sigh of relief to.

Once they reached the road again, the same road they used to run away from the Department of Energy all those years ago, Mike opened Lucas' door while the others piled into the back. Eleven ended up in the middle and they drove off with little warning from Lucas.

It seemed that the atmosphere grew tense when memory overtook their urgency, which was relaxing significantly, only to be left behind with the awkward image burned in their minds, but rather difficultly for Mike.

"What the hell took you guys so long?" asked Dustin incredulously.

"Yeah, we were out in under two minutes," Lucas persisted.

"How about we just not talk for the next five minutes?" Will spoke harshly for the three of them.

Dustin and Lucas both reacted very negatively to this, but when they saw Eleven squished in between the two guys in the back looking more uncomfortable and confused as their two friends, Lucas made a silent decision to not continue this and shook his head toward Dustin.

And so it remained quiet for a time and it was growing to be tangible soon enough.

Until Dustin noticed something out of place about Eleven's body in particular when eying the group in the back in the rear view mirror.

"What's going on with Eleven's shirt?"

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*Been a while, my bad. Very busy with life and all that, but I'm still hoping to have this done before the Season Two Premiere since it will have absolutely nothing to do with it in canon after Season One.*

*If there were any spelling mistakes or grammatical errors, give me a heads up!*

*And enjoy x*

*Also, lol been trying to cap chapters at 5000 words and I still managed to top it off with an extra 2700 something words.*

## 8. Here Comes Your Man

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### Chapter Eight

#### Here Comes Your Man

The car was pulled over on the side of the road where it was most discreet in the woodland area and Eleven and Will had disappeared behind one of the many trees shortly after they had stopped. Once Dustin pointed out the weird bunching underneath Eleven's shirt, they knew they would have to deal with her bra sooner rather than later.

Mike was still silent on the matter and while uncomfortable with the thought of Will helping Eleven, also knew he was in no place to be so close to her that way again. It wasn't like he reacted that way whenever he had to help Holly get dressed, nor was he flustered whenever his sister walked by him half dressed in the bathroom back in the day. But there was something mightily difficult with being near Eleven half dressed. And Will just had a no nonsense approach when the time came to come to Eleven's aid in vulnerable situations.

It was very different when they were twelve. And now while Mike was at an age to better appreciate these rare connections with the opposite sex, specifically Eleven, he was a complete fucking mess.

Dustin and Lucas didn't fail to notice this either. Dustin was grinning wickedly and Lucas tried to hide his smile but couldn't seem to stop dreaming up what happened. It was only until Dustin burst that they got an answer. Once he got to the part where he burst in after Lucas' call, Dustin could already see what he was going to say with a little glee on his face.

"I saw her with what I *think* is Nancy's bra on her body."

"And Will was in there with her?" Lucas asked dubiously after listening properly.

"He was helping her...like he's doing now," Mike said with his head in his hands.

"Weird...I thought you would," Dustin spoke honestly.

Lucas whacked Dustin in the side and Dustin exclaimed loudly, "I'm not trying to be an ass. I seriously thought this was Mike's area."

When Mike looked up to frown at this suggestion, Dustin went on to explain what he meant.

"We freaked out the minute she did anything remotely odd, like when she almost took her top off in front of us? And Mike would correct her whenever we essentially overreacted. That was how things usually played out."

Lucas couldn't help but agree with this from memory of that week with her. Mike always dealt with teaching Eleven how to be normal, what to do, and not to do, while also desperately looking for Will, while Dustin seemed only so helpful toward Eleven and Lucas speculated while being very paranoid about her existence. It threw the original dynamic a bit, even if they were never giving Will up again.

"Now Will's helping her, not only in the bathroom but while she's changing, which probably has something to do with their connection...it's just different," Dustin finished in deeper thought than usual.

"Connection?"

Lucas and Dustin looked to each other very carefully and turned back to Mike who never actually got the explanation from Will while he was unconscious.

Dustin swallowed down the dryness that collected when it dawned on him that maybe this should have been revealed to Mike at a better time.

Lucas sighed, "You were knocked out by your own shock when Will told us how he got Eleven back. After that, you were so emotional and then enamoured by her being back...we kind of just thought we'd

leave it until later, since our priorities switched really quickly when Will told us about the jacket."

Mike's frown deepened and neither Lucas nor Dustin felt alleviated by that sign.

Mike said sharply, "Explain."

---

Will had just clipped Eleven into place with her bra, and was working on the belt Mike had taken from his mother's room. Once he looped her through and tightened it to the very first hole, she was finally properly set.

Eleven didn't prevent herself from testing the undergarment as she bounced up and down. Will chuckled at the sight as she seemed pleased with this new adjustment in her clothes.

"Better?" asked Will with a small smile.

She nodded with a grin. "Much better."

"When everyone knows the truth, Nancy and my mom...well, maybe Mrs. Wheeler can teach you how to deal with them properly. I've only ever dealt with helping mom with her bras when she's really tired...but there is this neat trick she can do where she can take it off from under her clothes and slip it out."

Eleven chuckled at the incredible image considering she'd never attempted such a feat even with her sports bra like undergarment that she had to leave in the Upside Down. She didn't think it was possible with her very detailed one currently.

On the same spot she did a little twirl and attempted to look at her whole outfit now that she had felt better fit into the whole ensemble.

"You look like a real teenage girl El," Will reassured politely.

"Good," Eleven said with finality, her arms swaying slowly back into position. They came to a stop just as her face began to fall by her sides.

"Mike's acting different around me."

Will sighed after a short while and he gestured with his head back to the road. When she fell into step with him, he tried to best explain some of what he thought was why his friend was reacting that way.

"Do you ever think of Mike as something more than...more than what you think of Lucas or Dustin or me?"

"Yes...he's a friend...or more of a friend but not a brother..." she tried to word it from recollection.

"Sounds like you have the gist of why he might be acting different. Mike sees you the same way...even if it's too early for him to say so," Will said, making sure to cover all his bases.

"He's not...upset?"

Will looked puzzled by that. "I don't imagine he'd have any reason to be upset. I think he's just embarrassed because he saw you undressed, albeit very slightly."

"But you weren't. Are you more than a brother to me?"

Will shook his head adamantly and almost laughed at the irony. "No, definitely not in the same category as Mike...I'm just not uncomfortable when it comes to that stuff."

She nodded, although he had a feeling that Eleven wasn't totally satisfied with that response.

"You know what...because we have this weird...connection, you can think of me as like a – a kindred spirit."

"Kindred spirit?" frowned Eleven.

"Yeah, it's like a really good friend who's almost like a brother who doesn't see you the way Mike does."

"Oh," Eleven said, a new perk in her system from hearing such a description. She repeated the phrase to get used to it. "Kindred Spirit."

Truthfully Will felt quite warm from the whole conversation and knew he was right to trust Eleven, knew there was definitely something ethereal about their connection – knew they could empathise from their experiences. He was glad to have that with her.

As they re-approached the car, the expressions on his friends' faces told him that he shouldn't be too happy go lucky at present.

Eleven too, looked apprehensive as she came up behind Will and watched them carefully.

"Oh El. How do you feel?" Lucas asked breathily.

She glanced between the three and could sense the tension, particularly from Mike. Eleven knew she hadn't done anything intentionally to hurt him, and so simply answered, "Good."

Shortly after she got back in the car, which threw Dustin and Lucas but Mike was still distracted.

"So – Will you need to get money out next, right?"

Dustin seemed very keen on keeping the conversation away from whatever clearly had Mike's attention, who also looked quite pissed.

"Yeah," Will said uncertainly as his eyes glazed over the three quickly, "Let's get into the town."

Will didn't think this was the ideal atmosphere to surround a group of friends under dire circumstances, and with a girl who had telekinetic powers too, but didn't think tipping them all over the edge was the best way to handle this right now.

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Mike was still quiet on the way into town and Dustin was in charge in keeping Eleven distracted from his sudden mood change in his new seat in the back with her and Will. Truthfully, Mike had absolutely no qualms with her, and he wasn't sure if he'd ever be upset with her for anything she could possibly do to hurt him since it seemed his body reacted any way it wanted without his conscious consideration these days.



But he certainly was pissed. Mike couldn't quite figure out why, but he'd very literally never been the one to be left out on information, never the one to be tiptoed around, until it came to Eleven.

The fact that one person he knew for a whole week when he was twelve could leave such an impression on him all these years later was a thought for another day, since Mike hadn't been able to figure out his fixation for the last couple of years when a couple of girls had desired to be in his sights, (very rare, but it happened). With Will it was a whole other bottle of emotions. He was one of his best friends, always would be, but he could feel him hiding something. More than just Eleven's return.

Mike could sense that Eleven was part of it, but not the entirety of it. Some of what Lucas and Dustin told him explained it, but they never got the full picture either, and it was clear in their faces whenever they too questioned something odd in the story.

The car came to a stop on the outskirts of the town square and Mike was jolted from his thoughts when Will nudged him. There was a displeasure in his eyes when he suggested, "Come with me to the bank."

When Mike didn't immediately respond, Will sighed and got out the back and said, "If you don't want to get whatever's off your chest in private, I wouldn't be ashamed to in front of El."

With that Dustin and Eleven looked to the conversation, being pulled out of their own, Dustin's finger still pointing at something within the town mid air and her having just slowly explained its position being skewed in the Upside Down. Lucas scowled between the two guys and ushered the other two out of the car quickly.

"I'm taking El to the Hobby shop," Dustin said meekly.

"Is that safe?" asked Mike very suddenly getting out of the car.

"Safer than her being around to watch whatever this is," Lucas insisted as he locked the car. "Old man Robinson won't question her existence, let alone gossip about it to the townspeople."

"Regardless, someone else could see her," Mike suggested tensely.

Lucas shook his head and nodded toward Dustin, "She'll be fine, go on ahead."

Eleven didn't seem to have any say in the matter. She would've liked to be present during an argument that was potentially about her but Dustin felt that he would rather be a thousand miles away from it.

"C'mon, I'll show you the kite he's been repairing for Lucas," Dustin said lightly with his big smile.

She looked back once to see that Mike was looking uncertain and Will equally concerned, but for different reasons. Lucas stepped up shortly after she disappeared around the main street corner and into the Hobby Shop with Dustin.

"Now, I'm going with them. You better have sorted your shit out before you get back to the Hobby Shop."

Mike's shoulders slumped as Lucas turned on his heel and headed in the same direction. He turned toward Will who was pulling out a chequebook from his pocket and a one of the fancier pens he swiped from the Nurses office months before for situations such as these.

Will used the hood of Lucas' car as a surface as he expertly wrote in a style of writing familiar to Joyce Byers and signed the cheque. He wrote in the figure soon after that had Mike's eyes bugging out.

"You can't afford that!" Mike spluttered.

"He speaks," Will said sarcastically.

Mike's mouth shut stubbornly and his frown returned.

"As a matter of fact, I can afford it...the hush money is in an easy to access account. I just need Mom's signature and presto, cash."

Mike struggled to not say anything out of curiosity and out of principle of being annoyed with Will's secrecy. Will however, didn't seem so impressed with him either.

"We don't have a ton of time and we'll need to go to the Mall soon if we want to get

Eleven some of her own clothes and supplies – so why don't you tell me on the way to the bank why the hell you're so cheesed off."

Mike's face scrunched up with further dissonance and Will threw his hands up, gesturing he'd given up on giving Mike any more chances to explain it civilly.

Said teenage boy groaned in annoyance and spat, "Why didn't you tell me about Eleven on Wednesday, you know, when it first happened?"

Will's brow rose in disbelief. "That's what this is about? But I told you... you were unconscious." His face crashed in realisation that he was going to have to explain this properly, to Mike of all the people.

Will leaned against the car and said, "I can give you the short version here and now or the long version on the way."

"You're treating this very casually," Mike spoke, fairly offended.

"If I don't, I will probably lose my goddamn mind Mike," Will said honestly as he got up from the car and started walking in the direction of the bank. Mike sagged a little at hearing this and jogged lightly to catch up with him after damning himself for giving in.

When he finally fell into step with Will, the runt of the group decided to explain himself for a second time that day.

Admittedly he was a little more honest with Mike, because he felt like out of all of his friends he wouldn't judge him too harshly for his actions, until he did.

As they turned the corner, Will was speaking more assertively of what occurred, and why he'd been feeling so out of place those last couple of days. "I was so preoccupied with proving she was real in my head and in physical existence. All I wanted to do was help her... but I wouldn't know my connection was real until I got her back."

"You didn't want to tell us...me...because you were afraid you were imagining her?" asked Mike, almost rhetorically.

"Precisely. I've been going back for as long as I could remember. I figured it was just a brain thing...but it's just – I don't know, it's stupid."

"No, go on," Mike said wholeheartedly.

Will pushed a hand through his hair and fidgeted with his jacket before finally being brave enough to reply. "I think its part of me now...the Upside Down. And I think Eleven is tied into it too."

Mike's whole demeanour changed within a matter of minutes of getting the full explanation, his face darkening with concern. "What do you mean its part of you?"

Swallowing uncomfortably as they stopped outside the bank, Will jumped on his feet slightly. "I mean it literally. I'm pretty sure it's not just my trauma playing games. It's always been literally."

Will attempted to turn away toward the bank door before Mike stopped him with his hand. "You've been going back for years, haven't you?"

Will nodded before reassuring him, "I only saw El on that night. I'd never seen her before then."

"I believe you Will," Mike said with a pained smile. "Besides, you're the reason she's here."

"Yeah but I used you as a way of convincing her to come home. She was scared she'd bring something through, carried some guilt of what happened three years ago."

"But she was just a kid," Mike defended automatically.

Will grinned knowingly and responded, "I told her that too. Either way, I convinced her to come back, and it didn't hurt my efforts talking about how much you missed her."

Mike felt his heart drop deep down into his stomach as his cheeks heated up again.

"You're just saying that," adamantly Mike burrowed away from that

possibility again.

"Oh but I'm not. It got her attention, and it broke her resolve. I don't understand how you can't see that she clearly feels strongly about you too."

"Well there's a chance she could feel that way about you now, after all you've done to help her," Mike said sheepishly.

After a beat, Will burst out laughing. Mike looked rather humiliated by the whole scene and so Will forced it down as soon as was decent to his poor friend.

"Fucking hell Mike, you need some self confidence. You can't seriously believe that?"

"You caught on to when she needed help before it even came to my mind, help that I usually was capable of doing."

"Yeah and you weren't so hot when you saw a glimpse of her skin."

"I used to be!"

Will tried to stop smiling so much at the irony at it all and decided to try one last time in reassuring his lanky friend. "Point is Mike, my thing with Eleven is starkly different. I don't see her in any way shape or form that you do. I don't get the same desire to go unconscious when I'm around Eleven and I'm sure she sees it that way with me too."

Mike threw his hands up in the air and said incredulously, "I'm never going to live that down am I?" "

Don't count on it. I'll be telling this to your kids one day."

The small glare Mike displayed was in good humour and Will decided to stop teasing him so they could act as mature as they needed to when getting a whole lot of money out to help their possibly wanted experiment become the normal teenage girl she dreamed of being.

Mike wasn't used to the tables being turned on him. He was used to counselling Will, and over the last few days, he was noticing that Will

didn't need him as much anymore. While he should've felt like that was a cutting notion, in reality he was glad to see a side of Will that finally came to terms to what he'd experienced and who he was now.

Mike supposed this might never have occurred in Will if it weren't for Eleven coming back. Of all the scenarios he could have lived through and he got one of the better ones.

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Eleven's fingers were tracing the shelves, occasionally picking up dust along the way. Lucas snorted at the action and took her hand carefully and used the cuff of her sleeve to bat it off her lightly. She frowned in response.

"You don't want to be breathing any of that in. Chances are there is asbestos in it and these walls and it'll make you sick if you're not careful."

"If this place is covered in asbestos then we're already screwed," Dustin counter whispered.

Lucas rolled his eyes but decided to inform Eleven. "You grew up in a place that was probably scary spotless so you don't know what harm dust can do."

Dustin had picked up an old Airfix model kit and had been inspecting it when Lucas had said this, scoffing in amusement.

"She also lived in the Upside Down for three years. I think whatever the normal world has to throw at her is nothing in comparison."

Eleven shrugged in concurrence with Dustin's assumption. Lucas rolled his eyes again and having been fed up of looking around the store decided to finally ring the bell on the front counter.

The man that Dustin and Lucas named "Old Mr. Robinson" was indeed old and had a limp in his left leg. Much later on she'd discover that this was from an old war wound he'd dealt from fighting in World War II.

He also had a very good-natured smile and didn't look too confused by Eleven's presence, so Dustin and Lucas were rather relaxed around

him.

"Just checking in to see how the kite repair is going Mr. Robinson sir."

He blanked for a moment before putting his finger up and remembering. "I did finish it. I told my assistant to put it somewhere safe so hopefully this time he wasn't too much of a dunderhead about it. Last time he left out an antique Swiss Army Knife dating back to the first war that I'd been working on for a month, right out on the counter where another dumbass kid could get it."

"Is that it up there?" asked Dustin absentmindedly, as he looked up all the way to the top shelf. The store itself had a high ceiling to allow more space for products and repair items, but clearly created an obstacle for an old man who would have to retrieve it.

"I'm afraid so," spoke the old Hobby Shop owner with some contempt for an assistant that wasn't currently present. "Youthful asshole went on a break too."

Before anyone could offer to get it down for him, the door clicked open, evident by the sound of the doorbell at the top alerting the old man of more customers.

"Uncle Ted?"

The voice sounded familiar to both Dustin and Lucas but they couldn't quite pinpoint whom it belonged to until they came face to face with a girl with long silky black hair and librarian glasses with a darker ensemble than the day previous when Mike had knocked out Troy Donovan into the cafeteria linoleum.

While Dustin shrunk at the sight of her, Lucas was just plain shocked she was calling Mr. Robinson "Uncle Ted".

Eleven's eyes widened at the sight of this girl as she pulled out her bun and put the scrunchies around her wrist, to let her hair flow out mesmerizingly. It was everything she'd wanted her hair to be.

"Pretty," she said without holding back. Cassidy Fox finally saw the group in full and recognised the two boys specifically, but paid

particular attention to the unabashed girl she'd never seen in Hawkins before.

"Cass dear, you don't mind giving me a hand and getting Mr. Sinclair's kite from the top of the shelf."

She was pulled away from the distracting thoughts that kept her curiosity on Eleven and why she was friends with these two boys when she'd never seen them together before.

"Duck sure has creative ways of keeping things safe," she glanced at her Uncle amused.

"Yes that little asshole will hear about it soon enough."

Cassidy kissed the old shop owner on the cheek when she hopped over the little gate separating the customers from the workers and placed the mail down on the counter. "I got rid of all the unsolicited letters except for this one. Looks important."

"I won't consider it important until I know it's not some scheme to get more money out of me."

Cassidy went to get the ladder when Mr. Robinson turned back to the group before him.

"You go to school with my great niece Cassidy, don't you?"

Dustin croaked out an awkward yes and Lucas responded normally. "Yes, she's in Dustin's homeroom and my Social Studies class. Truthfully we didn't know you two were related."

"Well not many pick it with mixed race kids and old white folks like me. She's got a good nut on her, better than I ever did back in school," he decided to compliment her.

As she came back she leaned the ladder in the right place and climbed up with ease, despite how much it shook unsteadily to Dustin's great worry.

"The white and blue one?"



"There's more up there?" Mr. Robinson said disbelievingly. "Just bring them all down.

I can't keep calling on you to fetch things."

She handed him a few only to find a newly repaired green kite with hardly any dust gathered on top of it.

"Is it the green one?"

"That's it," Lucas responded comfortably.

As she came down she jumped off the last three steps and landed evenly before handing it over to Lucas who in turn handed it to Dustin to get his wallet out: "\$7.50?"

"Yep, but it will be more if it goes head first into another one of Margaret's rose bushes again. She wouldn't stop chewing me out for it, and I'm just her neighbour."

"Well she shouldn't live so close to the park," Dustin countered testily.

"Why do I have a feeling Henderson is partly responsible for the damage?" Cassidy presumed with mild amusement to her tone and a small smile.

Dustin froze up when he remembered she was there, and then became sweaty when he realised she knew who he was.

"He was, but he also wasn't the one in control of the kite at the time," Lucas admitted, "Just the guy who caused the distraction before Mike could regain the wind."

He put the correct amount on the counter with some stray coins. "Thanks for the repair sir."

"No problem Mr. Sinclair."

Lucas and Dustin were heading out, until the noticed something was missing. Or more, someone was missing.

"And was there something you needed Miss?" Mr. Robinson could still

be heard.

"Um...how do you get it to look like that?"

When Dustin and Lucas turned around they could see Eleven talking to Cassidy. Dustin couldn't have panicked more but Lucas seemed to understand the possible implications of this.

"Sorry?" asked Cassidy, rather perplexed by Eleven.

"Your hair?"

"Oh." Cassidy, shocked to be asked about anything dealing with her appearance, took a moment to consider it all. Not many saw much to be envied in it as it didn't replicate any trends or current hairstyles, which usually involved a lot of teasing and a heavy amount of suffocation from hairspray. Cassidy just couldn't find herself to go to the effort, which was ironic considering her mother's profession. Regardless she figured she could at least respond truthfully to the odd girl before her.

"Well a lot of it is my genes...but my mom's a hairdresser."

Her great uncle had gone to sort out shelves for a moment to give this odd little meet-cute some privacy. He had been just as keen for her to make some actual friends as her parents had been.

Lucas and Dustin arrived again by the girl's side and it was as though they were constipated with anxiety, which plagued her further with mystery.

Cassidy tried not to pay them too much mind, having to recollect that there were enough rumours to speak to their awkwardness too. Instead she concentrated on the teenage girl in front of her. She was dressed relatively similar to some girls she'd seen in Indianapolis, but there was a striking difference. She looked as though she had no idea what she was doing in this setting – but also gave off the intense intuition that she would be the first person you'd want with you in a fight. Her hair spoke volumes to this notion, lanky and matted in a couple of places. Now she knew why she was so fascinated by Cassidy's features, but was yet to figure out why the two teen boys

with her looked like they might start to visibly sweat beads.

"Are you new in town? I've never seen you before."

"She is," Lucas said immediately.

"Oh cool," Cassidy replied with ease, a little concerned as to why she wasn't speaking for herself, "where are you from?"

"Bad place."

"ICELAND!"

Everyone looked to Dustin rather suddenly as he violently covered up Eleven's mistake of answering honestly.

"Yes," Lucas glared daggers at Dustin for not being able to keep his cool. "Iceland can be very, very cold and the nights are long. El prefers it here."

"El, that's nice. Is it short for Elizabeth or Eliza?" Cassidy asked. She normally wouldn't care but she was intrigued to the boys' rather stunted way of going about this conversation. For this question, the girl was still unable to answer for herself.

"Nope, just plain old El," Dustin reassured croakily.

Cassidy scrutinised the three of them and considered the genuine strangeness that was occurring in this moment. Contemplating whether it was a hazard or not, she eventually went with the latter for the sake of this weird girl surrounded by a couple of geeks who were clearly uncomfortable with this who interaction. She'd make it her mission to find out why.

"My name's Cassidy...if you're not too busy I could take you to my mom's salon to get your hair done?"

"Like yours?" she blurted out before the boys could interrupt.

Cassidy beamed and nodded at her. "Yeah, just like mine, or close to it anyway."

Eleven turned to Lucas and Dustin and looked pleading. Lucas was adamantly against the idea but Dustin was keeling over very quickly to let her do as she wished. Lucas was unbelievably annoyed with him for this betrayal.

"We were planning on walking into a salon today anyway!"

"Maybe we should wait for Mike and Will," Lucas conceded.

"I can tell you what they'll say already," Dustin said with a knowing grin. He put on a puppy-dog face and said, "Anything for El."

"Was that Mike or Will?" asked Lucas confused.

"Mike obviously."

A cough interrupted their discussion as Cassidy watched them unimpressed. "I think she can go without your permission – or are all four of you her dads?"

"No, but we're taking care of her still," Lucas countered easily.

"I can get you a discount," said Cassidy bluntly.

"Sold," Dustin said eagerly.

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"Do you think it's stupid that I'm like this?"

"What? No, why would it be stupid?"

Mike and Will had just left the bank after a stupendously easy transaction between a fraudulent cheque to the hefty amount of twenties stuffed in Will's wallet. From what Mike could understand, it wasn't an obvious taking so wouldn't be too suspicious when looking over the accounts in future.

But as Mike had begun to sink into the thoughts of feeling anything spectacularly for Eleven, he knew that it was also very soon.

"I knew her for a week and I know there's something about this that makes everything the way it is, the way I screw up and fumble

around her, but that can't be *it*."

"Mike," Will said exasperated, "These things happen. It's not always a slow journey in, sometimes it just hits you and you fall all at once."

"Are you speaking from experience?"

"God no, I just watch awful romance movies with Mom when she feels like laughing at a couple of idiots."

"So you're basing your knowledge off of lies and the habits of idiots?" asked Mike dubiously.

"Partly," Will acknowledged, "only because some of them have a grain of truth to them. Just don't try to control things, don't try to be something you're not, let whatever happens, happen and actually communicate with Eleven honestly. That's what they never do in these dumb movies."

Mike nodded, considering his advice before squinting his eyes in recollection.

"Wait a second, is that why your mom was laughing and yelling like a maniac at the television a few weekends ago?"

"Yeah, The Boy in the Plastic Bubble was on TV. It's weirdly cathartic for her."

They had reached the Hobby Shop when they saw a small group gathered out the front. There was one more person than either Will or Mike could remember originally.

"So how do you guys know each other?" asked Cassidy conversationally. Dustin was lost for an explanation and thought the best remedy was to just talk nonsense.

"Uh...well El is – El is..."

"Will's third cousin," Lucas blurted out confidently.

Between clenched teeth, Dustin directed his disbelief at Lucas harshly, "*Will's third cousin?*"

"You guys don't really share much of a family resemblance – except maybe in your style," Cassidy glanced at the outfit curiously, having not noticed Dustin and Lucas for this moment in time.

Eleven looked mightily blank at this suggestion before Lucas supplied, "Your outfit, El."

Eleven still looked confused as to how Cassidy might perceive her to be Will's third cousin through her clothing choices, although they were admittedly his last word, with his readjustments on top of it.

"I guess?" Eleven responded uncertainly, knowing that her lack of speech was beginning to put strangers on edge.

Cassidy chuckled at hearing this and shook her head with slight mirth; "There's definitely some Byers in you." There was a slight before she continued, "To be fair, I didn't think his family was Icelandic in origin."

"They're not," Dustin covered immediately, "El's family moved there when she was little. Her English isn't so good now because of it."

"Well I hope she gets to go to some other places in the country before she goes home," Cassidy spoke candidly. "Hawkins must be pretty boring for an overseas traveller."

"No," Eleven smiled, to correct her without making her feel bad about her assumption. She could see Mike in the distance with Will. His spirits had evidently lifted since he'd momentarily left the group with Will and he was nervously smiling in her view. "I like it here."

Cassidy followed her eye line and noticed the boys up ahead as they walked toward the group. "Finally," they heard Lucas say in the background gratefully as keys jangled from his pocket and he got ready to unlock his car.

"Cassidy?" Will asked pleasantly surprised, glancing over the rest of the group to feel out the situation as best as he could until he could distinctly feel Eleven be jittery with a good energy. She clearly liked Cassidy's presence.

"Hey Will, Wheeler. Just met your Icelandic, third cousin El," she

said, announcing it awkwardly in realisation it was quite a mouthful.

Mike and Will quickly looked to their two guy friends, of which Dustin took his chance to blame Lucas for all of this overly complicated explanation by pointing sharply at him specifically with his mouth closed stubbornly.

"Oh yeah? Cool," Will said, attempting some confidence. While Cassidy could've taken note of this very odd reaction, she was more enrapt by the attention Eleven was paying Mike and a small smirk played out across her lips.

"Yeah she just told me she really likes Hawkins," Cassidy eyes swept between Mike and Will as Eleven beamed in her subtle way.

"Well it's been...it's been a while since she was last here. I think she missed it," Will said, trying to garner what the guys had made up about El to Cassidy without making things worse.

"Cassidy is coming with us," Lucas announced before any one could evidently screw up.

"Really?" Mike asked high-pitched and moved closer to El. "How'd that happen?"

It was almost accusatory, but he was being very particular with his tone, in hopes Cassidy didn't pick it up as his friends should.

"Her Mom has a salon," Dustin answered.

"A small one, it's in the garage of our house. She mostly does people for big dates and proms, but I'm sure she'd be glad of the project," Cassidy said honestly with a small gesture towards Eleven's hair.

"She's going to make it pretty," Eleven insisted beside Mike, "Just like Cassidy's."

Mike was an oily puddle of hormones and so wasn't going to go against Eleven's wishes despite how much his mind protested how dangerous any one new possibly finding out was for them. As soon as she put her hand on his arm, he knew he was gone.

"Cool," Mike croaked, instantly going red when he heard it himself.

"Alright, so where are we headed Cassidy?" asked Will, hoping to distract everyone from Mike's slip up, pulling Cassidy along carefully and to Dustin's inner jealousy.

"My house is at the end of Kiney Avenue," Cassidy replied easily as they headed toward the car, with Mike and Eleven taking the rear.

Eleven had dropped her hand from his arm as they made their way to the car, when they finally jumped in to the Cimarron, Eleven squished in with Will, Cassidy and Mike in the back.

Will, Lucas and Cassidy kept up the conversation during the short drive. Dustin was rather overwhelmed by both needing to be secretive and also being in proximity to his crush that he thought it best just to listen, which was very strange because they usually depended on him to stop the silence from settling in with his own inability to shut up. Eleven figured listening to conversations was better first to familiarise herself with the conventions of her friends better and Mike seemed to be so focused on Eleven being nearly on his lap in the back seat that he thought it best not to speak as to reveal himself to be trying to calm his heart rate.

They pulled up to a bungalow style house that Cassidy declared hers at the end of Kiney Avenue after driving six minutes away from the town (the one set of lights in their way took up the majority of the duration). Mike and Dustin felt immense relief when the ride was over.

Cassidy pulled Eleven out from her side and started walking toward the house.

"Why is El my cousin now?" Will asked the two in front.

"I had to think of something on the spot," Lucas admitted but then turned to the lot when they looked at him incredulously, "It's not that easy and he wouldn't say anything."

"Hey, if it was anybody else I would've been the master liar."

"Well you can't freeze up anymore. She's going to notice!" Lucas



countered.

"Guys, best not to bring attention to ourselves," said Will quietly.

"Right sorry. Looks like Fox will be sticking around if she's so interested in El," Lucas said with some annoyance. "This could blow our whole thing wide open if she finds out what's really going on."

"I don't know, El could probably use a girl for a friend. Teach her the things we can't," Mike said with a blush burning on his cheeks.

"Oh I'm sure you would've been just fine teaching her the *things* Mike," said Dustin slyly.

He received a surprisingly hard punch in the shoulder, despite Mike's build and ability, although he retracted quickly forgetting his bruised and battered knuckles.

"Ow, God Mike it was a joke!"

"You joked about El to the guy who literally beat Donovan to a pulp yesterday," Will scoffed, disbelieving his friend to be so casual. "Maybe Lucas was right to make her my cousin this time round."

"Yeah, if Mike and El make eyes at each other, which you both will, at least Fox won't think you're kissing cousins," Lucas added with a small smirk at Mike.

"Please, please God stop," Mike curled inwardly at the teasing.

A sharp knock rocked at the window and Cassidy was standing there with El, looking fairly confused.

"You coming in? Or are you hanging in the car like creeps for the next hour?"

"Coming!" Will spoke for the group, and quickly got out of the Cimarron, urging his friends with fierce eyes. Lucas, Mike and Dustin all looked reluctant as they got out of the car and stepped onto Cassidy's driveway, for very different reasons.

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*I realise Pixies 'Here Comes Your Man' was released in 1989 but for the sake of the chapter headline, we'll pretend that no one else cares.*

*Madonna's up next.*

*Also another character is re-introduced next chapter. Look out for that one.*

## 9. Debaser

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### Chapter Nine

#### Debaser

*Drip drip drip drip drip drip drip drip*

Clenching at the tap and fastening it so it would no longer irritate her, a black woman erring through her forties, with naturally short curls and a brain that had put her through more trouble than it might have been worth looked at herself in the mirror in the women's bathrooms of her underground facility.

She had washed her hands five minutes ago and finished with expelling her business ten minutes before. Truthfully, years of an operation that showed little results other than the proof of the existence of her greatest regret's continued lifespan a year ago at the hands of a small town police chief delivering goods into a box that transported itself to another dimension, was beginning to wear at her.

Her team were mixed in their opinions of the progress. Being motivated by stopping a man who had wronged them no matter how insignificant as well as the involvement of a telekinetic child powered some through to continue operations as long as three years. Others spoke abysmal prospects behind her, the director of this specific operation, back, too scared to say something to the wizened know-it-all woman who had grown a backbone or two and could retort with whipping speed to those who spoke ill of the purpose.

Zemora Jackson had just come across a water cooler situation similar to the negative jibes she could practically see coming from the desk workers, and watched as a white woman with overly large spectacles blushed profusely at her sudden presence as her conversational buddy averted his eyes once he spotted her, throwing out a quick greeting, while the woman couldn't think of anything worse but uttering her true emotionally high anxiety near her. Zemora gave

them the brief nod and clenched her fists as she headed to the bathroom.

There had been a glimmer of hope that boosted the action around the underground office and it had been such a significant boost that field agents were far more active in their searches and scoping that she was seeing real results again.

As the nails dug into her skin, she calmed herself down, picturing that eight year old she had failed all those years ago. Zemora knew she was alive, and the sudden shift within the dimensions had proven useful in providing Zemora with that status. Yes, it meant the world was more in danger from a terrible place, but it meant she was back. They were still working on how to cut that dimension off, but it all seemed tied down to those who had ever traversed the universes complex wonders, and survived.

It all came down to Jane in some way or another. While she and her chief scientists couldn't be certain how to interpret her part for hours of brainstorming, Zemora had come to a daunting realisation while in an incubatory period making herself a cup of coffee, that she knew Jane was the key. That from her old reports and from when the portals to other dimensions such as this one opened up and wreaked havoc, she was the one to do so. Zemora's stomach dropped when she also saw the implications of this.

The director above her, a stern man with thick-rimmed glasses and a constant scowl about him, who hadn't seen much in her until her mentor had pushed her forward for more serious consideration, had been brutally honest when she proposed a safer way to obtain the last experiment of the MKUltra procedures and her subsequent tests when finding solutions to gathering intelligence on the KGB.

O'Connor hadn't been immediately convinced, still wrapped up in her previous mistakes and actions, mistakes and actions which should have seen her with a bullet in her head had she never been able to have the chance to explain. She had been far too intelligent to let go in such a wasteful way, and so he kept her on ice until her claims had been proven true.

But he'd been clear that his mind was still mulling over Jane's future.

She'd been a dangerous little girl and had ended up killing many in her plight for freedom. Zemora couldn't help but send a pointed glare in his direction, which even made him blanch when what he said started to make an awful lot of sense to someone of her heritage.

*"Maybe if we hadn't gone after her with the sole intent purpose of taking her back to a white block cell to live out the rest of her days, she wouldn't have felt the need to do so. I don't think many others would want to comply when they have a gun stuck in their face, along with her companions at the time."*

*"I'm just trying to warn you...there's a high chance that upon her return that the order will be to terminate her."*

*"Doesn't that come down to you? The director of the CIA?"* she argued without hesitance.

O'Connor didn't appreciate an uppity woman, but he didn't meet her challenging stare with the sheer condescension as he once would.

*"Not always. I do make many decisions based on the welfare of this country...but sometimes it's not my place."*

Zemora had placed her head in her hands and tried to reason with him. *"She isn't a weapon...she's a child who understood that she didn't want what we forced on her. Jane is capable of intelligent thought and if anything was gathered from her experience with those young boys it's that she has a moral compass!"*

*"Experiment Eleven may have all that and more, but if she proves to hurt more people and possibly innocents...this could be out of my hands Zemora. I'm just trying to warn you. You know this happens often."*

Zemora had swallowed away any chance of a rebuttal when she too had just scraped the barrel of reasons for her own survival, despite never admitting that to anyone but James. She knew Jane had the potential to be dangerous, but she wasn't intentionally dangerous to the general populous, it was proven that most civilians died because of the reckless handling of trying to retain Jane in the first place.

And Zemora didn't truly believe that within all of this that the young

girl, nearing her sixteenth birthday soon enough, would be the biggest threat to the U.S.

Something was crawling beneath the surface, amassing in numbers she could never calculate without real knowledge, but could only assume that it was as terrifying as Stephen King could imagine. Jane had helped make the crack within the universe confining these creatures, beasts who hungered from the scent of human blood and fear.

It would have been in insult to write off Jane as a danger to the American folks of that small Indiana town when she may have been the only thing to stop what could come for them all. Then they would be in real shit.

But Zemora didn't have those facts lined up when last discussing the progress with O'Connor. Everything had happened so quickly that the last fax they sent was two days ago and there was hardly an acknowledgement of the developments what with the fear of Communism still reeking strong within the CIA. Hopefully, nothing would happen out of her control for the time being, but it always sent Zemora into a panic, which had her escaping in the bathrooms of their underground facility.

She couldn't risk failure when several routes could lead her down to such. James was the only one with the same fears but never let them show, nor did it send him reeling. But it was also her head on the line, very literally and the sheer fact was beginning to drive her insane.

"Ms. Jackson?"

Her blurred focus sharpened so fast that she turned, hand on the small holster, carrying a small pistol for her protection. One of her laboratory assistants had her hands in a surrendered rise and immediately, Zemora lowered her guard.

"Apologies Harriet, I wasn't alert."

"I should apologise director. I should've knocked...it's just, we've got some news. Ford has returned from his surveillance shift and wants

to speak with you urgently."

Zemora nodded firmly before leading the way out of the ladies bathroom and walking down the hall at a good pace as the laboratory assistant named Harriet Jenkins, who was occasionally treated like a secretary due to her gender, followed behind her. They eventually ended up back in the team meeting room, filled with the surface aspects of their case, dealing with those still left in the MKUltra scheme who were trying to track down Jane for their own gain rather than for her welfare. The walls were covered in the countless hours of detective work, pictures of similar and repeated images of the men working for the CIA but for the benefit of keeping themselves alive rather than for the country, trying to cover for their greatest mistake three years past.

Yanni Ford sat on the table, jet-black hair fresh from a shower, olive skin paling as the Indiana winter took away his complexion as it did hers, lighting up a fresh cigarette, eyes darting with anticipation. Her literal partner in crime James, the southern gentleman with boot camp sergeant looks with a heart of gold, crossed his arms, emboldening his impressive body mass as he did so, toothpick wiggling in suspense as he anxiously twisted it back and forth. Some would have seen this is a habit. Zemora knew it was a comforting mechanism for when he was stressed. She didn't know if it was working, and whether or not the cause for his rolling toothpick would also send her back to the women's bathroom.

When they walked in, they both stood up straight and James politely dismissed Harriet back to her work. "This ain't 'Nether' business I'm afraid Miss Jenkins."

She understood, knowing she was more valuable uncovering the mysteries of the Nether than speculating in detective matters where Zemora's mind had drifted closer after years of exploitation. As the door shut behind her, Zemora looked to Yanni with a keen plea in her eyes.

"This better be something new Ford, we're getting low on momentum after the universe shift proved to be true."

"I think you'll find this very useful Ms. Jackson," Yanni responded, an

excitable jitter to his usually cool tone.

He picked up a manila folder from the table and took a drag on his cigarette. He handed it to her as she took a seat at the same table he was half sitting on again.

"I got these developed just after I took them. I wanted to come with some solid proof of my claims."

Flipping through, she could see an upscale home in the middle of nowhere; so contemporary in design it could have been a business or the home of a yuppie. A group of people went inside in the middle of the day and left an hour later with an extra person in tow.

Her brow knitted together as she looked closely at the image and saw a zoomed in snapshot of the new part of the group. They were a tall gentleman from the build, with bandaging covering most of their head and face, distorting any chances of facial feature recognition from natural eyesight. There was a couple of tufts of light hair poking through if the black and white photography was any indication and so she could only presume it to be a blond man. The house too plagued her, familiar to images she'd seen before many times.

"Remind me, why were you on surveillance at this location?"

"This was the house where Barbara Holland went missing, before she was declared dead. This is where that...that thing found her and took her. She cut her hand on a beer can and took the scent."

Zemora closed her eyes for a brief moment and nodded, finally in recognition of the images memory. "Right, of course."

"So the owner is housing the old MKUltra team? Was it abandoned?" James questioned as they came to his mind.

"No it's still a residence under the original owner," Yanni clarified. "We still don't have any idea as to what they were doing there but we're going to continue to do surveillance under your permission. If we can mic the place up when the resident isn't home, we think we'll get what we need."

Zemora sighed heavily, as James looked at her uncomfortably. She



never liked going to these measures. If she knew the people that had dealt with this all three years before well enough, they were all quite paranoid and ready to rip out any source of outside equipment they saw it. Zemora wanted to her team to be like ghosts, supposedly legend and yet never suspected for fear of ridiculousness, not like the team three years before that blundered in like deadbeat drunk fathers after a night at a bar, smearing dirty work hands across the walls unsteadily trying to end up crashing on some comfy floor for sleep, while waking everyone else up to the realities of their situation.

"Was this resident heavily involved in the investigations last time?" she asked, rubbing her temples.

Yanni scrunched up his mouth and shook his head. "Nothing significant, but we're still looking into the owner's background, police checks, etcetera."

"Good, once you find out everything you can within our sources, if it checks out...we can go ahead with the total invasion of privacy."

"Who knew you were such a libertarian," Yanni lightly chided.

"Hardly...I just don't want to be so foolish with our actions...we can't risk any sort of cuts to our budget or our work. O'Connor isn't going to be forgiving this time around."

James solemnly agreed and Yanni shrugged his shoulders. "If I'm right about who the man with the most frustrating mask is, we might be a lot closer than we suspected."

Zemora looked to him with a small frown. "You know who he is?"

"No. I think he looks like someone familiar though...but it would be almost impossible if the paperwork was correct."

James and Zemora looked at the image carefully again, trying to zero in on anything that might stand out about the new character to the group. He was authoritative in stance, despite being the one with the most ailments. Almost like a comical G.I. Joe villain and yet sinister to the bone that the arms on her hairs began to stand on end.

Zemora felt her stomach drop as she noticed other things that put her

on more edge than she'd care to admit. The shape of his head, the way he commanded the men surrounding him, his intimidating height and something that echoed a charming and trustworthy figure of importance. A figure that many in high places considered the greatest and most daring scientist, a pioneer of his field. A man who once catapulted her from the seventeen year old stem graduate of Harvard, to a woman very respected in his team, his main contributor of the MKUltra serum that he would take credit for so it actually made some leeway in the eyes of private investors and in government sectors. Or so he had explained to her.

And then he took it too far.

"It can't be..."

Zemora swallowed away the uncomfortable lump that had formed from the moment she started to see something eerily familiar with a past mentor of hers. Her heart picked up and her hands almost clenched the table.

"That hair isn't blond is it? *Is it?*" Zemora demanded an answer of her field agent.

The lax attitude had tightened at the sight of his boss reacting so violently to this fresh speculation. "White as snow...it's the only reason I thought so."

"Son of a gun, he's alive?" exclaimed James as he threw his toothpick in the bin and took the photograph from Zemora's grasp, of which she simply sat there with her fingers pinned together, shock overwriting her features.

If he was still alive, then it meant that Zemora was facing more than a dumb blundering enemy, but a determined and ambitious one. And Jane was in more danger of never seeing the light of day again.

That was one way to rock the boat for some more momentum. Zemora shook herself from the young woman she once was, enamoured by the man who had given her the much needed push into her prestigious career only to end in near infamy. The woman who now had much more on her shoulders and more lives at stake

returned, with a hardened exterior and a rejuvenation of resolve as she stood up and took command of the few people left in the room.

"Bring everyone in here, including the laboratory workers. We need to start working fast and we're going to have to assign field agents to watch the originals for the sake of their safety...if it's him, then it's highly likely Jane is in the correct dimension after all these years. He'll find her in ways we haven't even thought of yet and I don't think he'll stop at much to get her this time."

"Yes Ma'am," Yanni said with a fierce nod of comprehension before exiting with haste to alert the others. Zemora avoided glaring at Ford, despising the term and very roughly pinned the new image to the corkboard, and circled his face in red pen, hoping others who had worked with him previously could identify the man who worked up such a fuss within her soul.

"Is this the end Zemora?"

She turned, her face set into the hell-bent fury she still held onto years after her first failure. James had been present, the first ally in her work, the most empathetic muscle within the entire CIA and the only reason she survived that attempt to remain here, useful in a rescue that may have been years in the making, but maybe worth the trials and tribulations that came with it.

"I need it to be James."

She knew now that there was no chance she could involve O'Connor. If she was going to take down her old mentor then she was going to do so with stealth and not an army surrounding him. Zemora was going to finish what she had started all those years ago, making up for what she left that eight year old shaved girl in and what she let Martin Brenner continue to do, exploiting the brilliant women who trusted him with their lives.

James didn't look remotely disagreeable. The soldier too, ruined of his faith in his previous employer, knew that no prison would hold him if he still held all his contacts and that no injustice served would keep his dearest friend alive. James knew there was only one absolute solution.

Hopefully, it wouldn't kill them in the end too.

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*Shortest chapter ever, but I didn't want to give too much away about these characters since they've appeared before (heavy hint guys).*

*Sorry it's been a while. I've properly planned out all my chapters and have a one shot series based on three time periods in this story. I'm also super aware of how close the second season is now and will try to get it finished before then now that I have a clear idea of how this story ends.*

*If I don't, my bad. But it will be finished either way. But the season 2 binge watch takes priority obvs.*

*It's been real,*

*Fadinggx*

## 10. Material Girl

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### Chapter Ten

#### Material Girl

Cassidy led them through a very cluttered house and into an even untidier garage, although space had been cleared for the 'salon'. There were still boxes unopened from when she first moved but the most welcoming aspect was the smell of wood burning in a fireplace near the back of the house that wafted down. Anything that didn't smell of chemicals to Eleven was magnificent until she walked into an invisible cloud of them when entering the garage.

These weren't the sterile cleaning chemicals that stuck to every surface but gave her a sensory vibe of being sticky and maybe unnecessary. They were just as likely to induce a headache, but the magnitude was thoroughly less when Eleven's very first headaches took place due to crying and stress.

There is a cat lying flat out on the carpeted area by a slouchy couch, dedicated to the salon and stretches languidly when it hears people approaching. Eleven's heart seizes her at the sight of it and she unknowingly grabs Lucas in the fray.

He's about to shrug her off from habit when others touched him but noticed how pale she was. "El, are you okay?"

She looks up at him and is shocked to see she grabbed him. "Sorry... cats don't like me."

Lucas frowned at this statement and turned to Mike who is busy taking in the home salon with their friends. He nods to him so that he gets his attention and he comes over when his eyes drift over to Eleven.

"El, what's up?"

Her eyes are glued back on the most chilled out cat Lucas has

probably ever come across and she doesn't see it that way evidently. Mike soon picks this up and wonders if this is something from before the Upside Down or something that freaks her out because she doesn't know what it is.

"Cats don't like her," Lucas repeated, sounding sceptical at the suggestion.

It sinks in for Mike when he watches her eyes glaze over and can tell she's thinking deeply about something, a memory, her past, something that always ends up taking her far away from the present.

Will soon picks up on her vibe and walks over too. This leaves Dustin looking around curiously by himself although he doesn't see how this will work against him yet.

Mike doesn't try to ask her what's wrong or how to help when he walks over to the cat. He's never been a fan and has only been capable around Will's dog at most and Dustin's cat Mews was never one for affection from his friends but only his mother. Mike knows he needs to prove something, however.

She is scared, but the feeling is decreasing when Mike walks right up to it and very tentatively pets it. The fluffy grey cat relishes in the feeling and yawns, rolling closer to Mike. Mike's own personal fear diminishes the moment the cat has accepted him without even questioning him to begin with. It stands up, unsteady for a moment before it rubs up against him.

Cassidy comes back from finding her mother and looks amused by Mike's affection for her cat.

"That's Mothball. Blind as a bat, as old as my great uncle, once let a rat and a bird drink from his bowl and only cries for food and attention," Cassidy listed off with clear practice. "He's the most unfeline cat to ever exist."

"He also purrs louder than my Dad snores," Mike adds.

"Yeah, we couldn't figure that part out," Cassidy chuckled as she stands next to Dustin, who is attempting not to appear quite like a

lunatic in her presence.

Mothball meowed in appreciation, and if one were to describe the noise it made closely, it would be the equivalent of a stoner teen that maybe no longer had a straight direction in life but had accepted it and was the happier for it.

A toilet's flush is muffled and running water is soon heard afterwards before a very relaxed white, blonde woman with only Cassidy's eye shape to indicate their relation, walks through an open doorway with hanging beads to conceal it. Her look is very seventies inspired, her hair long and curving outward from her face in wispy blonde waves. Her voices could be described much the same, an attractively croaky voice that forms waves and drags on the way a hippie child would. She wears a lot of turquoise and bangles, with a long skirt and a peasant shirt to top it off. Michael immediately feels the regret pouring from him as he thinks it best to take Eleven's hairdo somewhere remotely normal but is stopped when she greets them.

"Well hello. You must be Cassidy's classmates," she directs within an almost dreamy complexion. "My name is Donna, don't worry about that surname nonsense with me."

Will is the one taking the reins for the group introductions, probably because he knew Dustin was basically incapacitated, Lucas was just stunned a person like this could still exist in this decade and Mike was figuring out an exit strategy.

"I'm Will Byers, these are my friends Lucas Sinclair, Dustin Henderson, and Mike Wheeler. And this is my, um, cousin, El. She really badly needs some skilled hands for her...predicament."

Unlike her overall demeanour, Donna's eyes widen as she finally spots the strangely formed lumps hidden through the best job Will could do at brushing out her hair and Dustin's at putting it into a bun. "Oh my, what on earth happened to your locks dear?"

Eleven looked thoroughly lost for an explanation before Lucas thought of something. "She had a really rough trip on the flight over from...Iceland. Her hair took quite a beating from it."

Cassidy frowned at this excuse as she watched Lucas carefully, as he refused to show any signs of distress, also refusing to be caught in a lie. Donna was instantly inspecting it regardless of their answers, not minding the amount of personal space of Eleven's she was invading as she closely analysed the strands and how to undo the locks as best she could as she carefully tugged on the scrunchie, freeing her hair from its bond.

"Well, we'll rewash it all in the new basin I had installed...put some essential oils through it. Brush it out as much as possible and cut it to a suitable length...although she would look thrilling with a buzzcut."

Eleven looked absolutely horrified.

"It took a lot of effort to grow out her hair from a bad cut last time... she wants it as long as it can be given the circumstances," Will added for better clarity.

Donna nodded and said agreeably, "Our hair can be a big part of our identity. We'll keep it as long as we can make it dear."

It was then to their shock, that Eleven wasn't being haphazardly cut to with large scissors as the guys suspected she might be taking her to an evidently hippy hairdresser with her own special style. Some would call it outdated and uncool. But if Cassidy's hair, simple and yet not untouched by the influence of 80's waves and a slight bump of volume, was any indication, then it was likely Eleven would be in safe(ish) hands. Once she was handed a thick folder of lengths, cuts and styles, with various ones to choose from in the recent era and celebrities, Eleven finally poked her finger with a razor-sharp jolt at a promotional still of Mia Sara's character Sloane Peterson in Ferris Bueller's Day Off from a teen magazine.

"Lovely and won't take as long considering the groundwork we need to do to get there dear," commended Cassidy's mother warmly which made Eleven feel more comfortable.

She was led away to the basin where Donna explained what was going to happen. Will sat by her and explained that it wasn't going to be like a bath when she had another look of panic settle in her eyes. As she laid back in a cream leather chair and was tilted into a basin,



her hair received warm water, lathered into her scalp.

Once Donna started massaging her hands into her scalp and through her hair, she was relaxed significantly.

"You've never had a massage before, have you El?" Will surmised quickly as her face fell from the tense hold into the slack contentedness she was now experiencing.

"What's a massage?" she asked blearily.

Cassidy again looked mightily surprised at hearing her ask this until Dustin spoke up. "We don't know the word for 'massage' in Icelandic."

She brushed it off until her mother asked her to help. "How about you give our new client a small manicure Cass? I fear this overseas flight has done more damage to her aura than it has her physical features."

While Cassidy wasn't one to prescribe to her mother's terms and the highly spiritual beliefs attached to them, Cassidy couldn't help but agree with her mother's assessment. She hadn't seen El so comfortable in her own skin yet. She was a shy girl with much insecurity, which was obvious enough, but she was constantly aware, like a spider, up and ready at half a second's notice.

She was also worryingly green in colour. Will looked equally as worried but Cassidy didn't wish to embarrass her with questions of her health in front of these boys, even if one of them was related to her and was likely the most sympathetic to her mysterious plight.

And while Cassidy didn't see any of them as a threat, she still had to consider the possibility that this friendship group was damaging to this odd and enamouring teenage girl, considering how much she was allowed to speak for herself.

She pulled out a drawer from an old dresser, repurposed to be part of her mother's in-home business and found a selection of nail polish colours, clippers, files and buffers. Cassidy also didn't see the necessity but her mother's contradictory vanity was lax to her beliefs that sprouted from the freedom and love period of the sixties, and

Cassidy knew that people could be both complex and like their nails to be manicured.

"What's your favourite colour?"

"Pink," Eleven said quietly, hardly any hesitation in her response. Mike smiled to himself, hiding it behind his hand.

Cassidy chose the least offensive pink in the drawer, reminiscent of the rare coloured sandy beaches coveted in the recent colour encyclopaedia she received for her birthday.

Cassidy took to a swivel chair and sat beside El while her hair was washed and rubs her fingers clean with rubbing alcohol before clipping her nails and filing them to an agreeably round shape. Eleven gets light headed from the fumes but doesn't totally despise the smell when Will is sitting on her other side and the boys are forced to sit on the lumpy couch. Mothball seems most entertained by the three.

With nothing much else to do but watch Eleven receive treatment for her nails and her hair, Dustin saw another possible addition so that Eleven didn't stand out for the wrong reasons.

"Maybe we should put makeup on her again..."

Lucas elbowed Dustin in the gut for being so vocal about what was clearly a shared idea and Mike protested it immediately.

"She doesn't need makeup asshole," Mike harshly whispered.

Dustin stopped himself from rolling his eyes before responding honestly. "I don't think she needs it for those reasons...but they've noticed Mike."

He gestures to his face for better understanding and says quietly, "Girls our age – or any age for that matter don't look that discoloured without some sort of cause for suspicion."

Lucas agreed hesitantly, and Mike's glare lessened when he saw the questioning glances between Cassidy and her mother every now and then.

Cassidy had finished with one hand and was working on the other when Donna got to the hard part of the hair cut.

Combing through wet hair, she eventually opted on Eleven not facing the mirror exactly and let her focus on Will so that she wouldn't grow anxious about her hair again as he kept her attention with a conversation about school. Lucas whispered in his ear and moved away swiftly back to the couch where the cat had attempted to take his seat, Cassidy carefully watching the whole way.

Dustin picked up Mothball and placed him on his lap where he was happy to settle into a loaf position, eyes closed and purring. When he caught Cassidy's eyes for a moment, Dustin averted them back to her cat and stroked him so as to concentrate his nerves away from her inquisitive stare.

Soon Cassidy was done well before her mother had a chance to finish on the first knot and instructed Eleven to keep them aloft. "You don't want to smudge the paint."

Eleven smiled gratefully at Cassidy, mesmerised by her handiwork with her newly done nails. It wasn't something she had been aware of from her reading, but she immensely enjoyed the clean and polished feeling that came from her nails being tended to.

"Thanks, Cassidy," Will spoke meaningfully, glancing away from Eleven.

He was careful to frame himself that many had seen him, so as to gain the sympathy that came with being the kid who disappeared for a week in unknown circumstances.

"It means a lot...she's not great with flying and this is exactly what she needed after her trip over..."

"It's no problem Will," said Cassidy kindly, albeit tightly.

"But I was hoping to ask you for another favour?"

"Oh?" she spoke unexpectedly.

"Yeah...El lost all her luggage, which is why she's been more stressed

than comfortable the last 24 hours...all her toiletries, makeup and clothes are gone and she's not coping," he said, with an ounce of truth to the matter.

Cassidy softened at hearing this, and Will continued while he was on a pretty decent lying streak.

"I've got a ton of cash to pay for everything, but my Mom hasn't got time to go shopping with El while she's working and well...we're a bunch of guys who play D&D most weekends."

Dustin looked about ready to die when Will had mentioned their beloved past time, Lucas wasn't much impressed either with the confession and Mike was just waiting for an answer, past his status of being the epitome of a fucking nerd.

"Could you give us a hand? Maybe then we won't look like creeps when it comes to the more intimate stuff."

Cassidy considered him for a moment and when she took a quick look at Eleven, knew that maybe this was her chance to figure some stuff out in a more isolated situation.

"I'd be happy to help Will."

"Cool," said Will brightly. "You wouldn't also mind providing her with a temporary makeover until then too?"

Cassidy looked disbelieving at such a suggestion but Eleven pictured Mike putting blush on her cheeks and very carefully applying mascara to her eyes and she sat up. "Could you?"

Cassidy turned to her mother who nodded without hesitation, her daughter shrugging in return. "You may as well get the full works, I suppose."

It's about half an hour of tedious combing, cutting, trimming and snipping that Donna finally reaches for a hairdryer in a drawer and connected it to the power outlet. The group is fairly sleepy in their wait, with only Mike being the energised group of jittery cells, leg jiggling in anticipation as habit always had done in these moments.

When she flipped the switch, a crashing noise filled with electricity sparked up, with darkness soon enveloping the garage.

Mike could feel his friends immediately react to this and quickly panicked when he thought of Will and El somewhere in the darkness.

Lucas screamed as his memories of the night in the Middle School took over as Dustin tried to muffle him, his own instincts kicking in and needing silence to survive whatever the hell might be lurking in the dark.

Will had pulled El to him, hair still slick and she was attached to his body when she felt his familiarity take her, but she was practically standing in front of him, ready to be useful.

A flashlight illuminated the blacked out garage and Donna's face was eerily framed in its warm glow.

"Oh, I'm so sorry kids," she said breathily, "That happens sometimes, I'll go check the fuse box and get things working again."

She handed the flashlight to Cassidy who was now given the literal spotlight and she looked fearful too, although certainly not from the irrational fears built up from childhood. The flashlight was slowly spread across the room as she checked on everyone. Dustin was just releasing Lucas' mouth and Mike was in a crouch position on the couch, with Will clutching Eleven, who looked by far the most prepared for something, but Cassidy could never predict what that would be.

"We haven't had a sudden blackout like that in a while...are you guys okay?"

Mike reverted back to his normal sitting position, as Will sat Eleven back down in the chair, her fierceness changing to that of confusion. He quietly said, "It's always flashing, always flashing."

It served as a reminder, and everyone else seemed to be coming down from their heightened adrenaline rush, with Cassidy left curious about the whole incident that had also put her on edge in a way she couldn't comprehend.

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After the lights had turned on, and Eleven's hair had finally been styled and dried, the entire trip to Cassidy's mother's in-home salon had taken about an hour and a half.

"Just one last thing dears," Donna insisted.

She kept Eleven gently in the chair and pulled a small fishing tackle box onto the vanity table. Opening it up, she revealed a vast array of cosmetic items.

"A touch here and there will enhance your natural features."

Enhancing Eleven's natural features didn't require as much time as Lucas had predicted and she didn't end up looking like Cyndi Lauper in any of her music videos. Blush, mascara and a cherry gloss were perfected upon Eleven's visage and she relished in the smells of the cosmetics, and to the pleased expressions of her friends, especially when Donna claimed to finally be finished.

Once she was allowed to look at herself in the mirror, Eleven's face dropped in shock. It had been so long since she'd been happy with her appearance, so proud it was overwhelming. Her face broke out into the biggest smile she could muster from years of training herself to be passive in front of others.

"You still clean up pretty nice El," Dustin said confidently.

"Yeah, you look great," Lucas spoke with sincerity.

Will simply grinned as he watched his kindred spirit glow.

For Mike though, seeing Eleven turn around to look at herself in a mirror and light up with the gleeful expression she had made up for nearly shitting himself in Cassidy Fox's garage. It didn't hurt that once she walked up to him, her hair had a touch of lavender wafting throughout and showed herself off to him.

"Pretty?"

"Yeah...really pretty."

Cassidy had forgotten for a moment that she was highly suspicious of

the whole lot of them when she watched something as adorably uncomfortable as Mike Wheeler expressing sentiment for a girl and Will pulled up and handed her a pretty nice sum in twenties considering the discount she had offered.

"Give this to your Mom, Cass. She did a good job."

Donna walked back in and waved off the funds entirely. "Oh no, I've succeeded where money doesn't need to be a reward. Her aura is relaxed and she seems pleased."

"Well thank you, Mrs Fox, I mean, Donna," Will speaks kindly although manages to slip the sum to Cassidy as he recalls her briefly mentioning that funds weren't always great and he was indeed paying for the service her mother supplied that day. Cassidy was grateful for the reluctance on his part to follow her mother's wishes and swiped the money into her pocket. She was sure a bill was due soon.

He turned and started to walk away from the garage, where his friends and Eleven were reconvening by Lucas' car. As she flipped the notes in her hand to count them, he pulled to a stop and called back to her, dragging her attention away from the money in her hands.

"...You coming, Cass?"

She slowly smiled and nodded, making sure to grab her purse on the way out of the garage from her school bag.

After the lights had turned off, the boys were ready to get the hell out of that house, mostly embarrassed but also very much so aware of their priorities again, driving away with a new passenger still in tow to Eleven's anxious delight.

---

It was a tight squeeze, one that made Eleven and Mike forcibly bunch a lot closer for comfort than either had anticipated and with only Will supplying any sort of conversation. Nevertheless, they made the ten-minute drive to the Starcourt Mall glad to see that Eleven could blend in with the crowd better, and the guys believing that going to the mall wouldn't likely be on the radar of anyone hunting after Eleven.

Lucas, the only one with much experience in the mall since the guys don't tend to find their way at the shopping locale often, leads the way. He takes Eleven's arm into his like a gentleman escorting a lady, which heightens Mike for a second until Will rolls his eyes and says, "Dude, chill."

"That over there is the Hot Dog On a Stick, not worth your time, honestly," Lucas points out to El who is amused at Lucas' observations. "The Dairy Queen is dynamite - the server girls are always cute - not that that matters to you obviously - but the ice cream is pretty good too!"

"I don't think the food court matters much right now," Mike comments honestly.

"Yeah, hate to say it fellas...and, and ladies, but we do have to get the most boring part out of the way," says Dustin, not entirely thrilled to go clothes shopping.

"With Byer's style and my dire need to stay away from capitalism as much as possible - we're going to be finished sooner rather than later," Cassidy states quite clearly, gently taking Eleven's hand and leading the way to a department store far away from the food court, Will and Lucas in tow.

Dustin looks down at his clothes with some disdain and says, "Do I have bad taste?"

Mike rolled his eyes and catches up, with Dustin coming up in the rear in due time.

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It had been forty-five minutes. They'd come out with nine items from two stores already - what Cassidy insisted were basics. A second pair of jeans in acid wash black that were extra skinny and higher waisted, a pair of boots that she managed to get cheaper for a scuff mark, a denim jacket since she had Mike's coat for winter weather, two sweaters that were half price in a store sale, one that was green, white and blue and another that was knitted with a knotted cord design and beige, a plain turtleneck, a black and yellow button-up shirt ("it'll go with the jeans"), a plain long sleeve white button up



shirt that had a pocket on the front, and a long sleeve striped shirt.

Currently, Eleven was about to add a pair of loafers, a mid-length skirt, a pair of pyjamas and was now trying on a dress - based on Cassidy's advice. From the way Cassidy had seen Mike eyeing El in every outfit as though every little thing she did was magic, she knew the girl would need a nice dress at some point or another if Mike ever gathered enough courage.

Cassidy set the clearly bored Lucas and Dustin to find a pair of relatively cool sunglasses at a decent price and a few pairs of socks. She sent Will off into the department store to find a warm scarf and gloves - and maybe a pair of earmuffs or a hat too. They were all happy to be given something useful to do. A shop girl helpfully added a basic white t-shirt to the try-on pile when Cassidy asked her if they had any in stock in El's size.

"Thank you," Cassidy said politely before she walked off. Mike was the only one left sitting at the special chaise lounge waiting for El to change again.

"Do you need me to do anything?" Mike asked reluctantly.

Cassidy shook her head, to his ultimate relief. "No, I don't think you're that confident with me being alone with the girl you're clearly head over heels for Wheeler. Besides every time you react like Cindy Crawford walks out of that stall, we get things done a lot quicker."

Mike is taken aback by this brash statement. He could see the similarities certainly, but he was never thinking of her crassly - but she wasn't wrong about the former statement. Cassidy was clearly curious and they couldn't afford for her to poke and prod El at her most vulnerable.

"What's that meant to mean?"

"It means," Cassidy says more quietly as she steps closer, considering Eleven's not deaf, "that Will's cousin thinks pretty highly of your opinion Wheeler."

Mike shrugs his shoulders as he inevitably burns at his cheeks.

"I'm ready."

"Come on out Miss Reykjavik," Cassidy called back, taking a seat next to Mike who perked up at the announcement.

El was frowning, as she didn't understand the nickname suddenly given to her by Cassidy, but it didn't stop her from leaving the changing room. She was wearing a moss green, short sleeved, A-line dress, cinched with a belt that fell just above her knees. Mike's shoulders sagged at the sight of her. She was playing with the skirt, ruffling about the texture when she asked, "Pretty?"

Mike swallowed and smiled, almost forgetting Cassidy beside him as he felt the focus of the world soften around Eleven, as she stood in her element - exploring her femininity and her freedom unabashedly.

"You look beautiful El."

Her eyes widened. She knew the significance of the word. It was marked down in her dictionary. She had finally heard it aloud - not the clunky pronunciation she'd given it when attempting it. Her smile was brilliant and she almost felt shy for a moment. She simply repeated the word quietly and looked to Cassidy for her assessment.

"It's a winner girl."

---

"Are we nearly finished?"

Lucas had forgotten what shopping with girls felt like after cutting himself from the activity of going with his mother and sister for the last time two years ago. It was an hour and a half in now and they'd left the third store with a decent haul once more. Will had a significantly lighter wallet but overall was surprised with Cassidy's eye for a bargain even when it seemed like she was getting more than he suspected was necessary (although he decided not to comment since he'd picked out a couple of the pieces that ended up in the shopping bags that were possibly deemed unnecessary, such as a navy blue beret he found in JC Penney that Dustin scoffed at).

"Well is there anything we're forgetting?" Cassidy asked, mostly in

Will's direction. The girl had lost her suitcase in her mind after all. "I know we have to go to the Drug Fair to pick up some makeup for El, but - Oh."

Her face fell with the recognition of something considerably more private when Cassidy moved closer to Eleven to whisper in her ear. El's eyes and cheeks burned and she nodded.

Cassidy turned to the boys and said, "El and I are going to have some girl time - by ourselves - no take backs, Wheeler," she directs at Mike before he can interrupt. "There must be a comic book store around here somewhere you boys can hang out in?"

Will caught on the quickest. He forked out some cash of the Hamilton variety and handed it to Cassidy discreetly.

"Yeah, sounds like an excellent idea, we'll see you in half an hour? I think the mall closes around then - we'll meet you at the -"

"Wait, I'm not so sure about this," Mike started.

Dustin, having a peachier appearance than most were used to seeing on his complexion elbowed Mike roughly. "Fox is giving us an out man - and I don't think you *really* want to be present for the next half an hour. We'll meet you by the Dairy Queen where Lucas will fail to hit on the girls at the counter."

Lucas consequently punched Dustin in the arm.

Will dragged Mike away before he could protest the conditions once more and Eleven waved them goodbye until she would see them again. Mike watched as Cassidy slipped her arm into a loop with Eleven, making her feel comfortable and safe. At least Cassidy knew that this wasn't easy for her to be separated even if they felt it was necessary for some dumb girl bonding reason.

"Are you sure we can trust Fox?"

Lucas rolled his eyes, stopping in his path. "Mike it's not about trust - which is hardly a problem if we *keep our cool*, which you kind of suck at - it's about what clearly makes girls, you know, girls."

Dustin held up his hands to his chest in such a suggestion which made Mike blanch.

"Yeah, El might like you but there's only so much exposure she can handle after the way you reacted to seeing her in a bra earlier," Dustin explained simply.

The boys couldn't walk into the Starcourt Mall's arcade with fears that their allegiance to the local Hawkins Palace Arcade being quashed and some perks being lost with that too. After a bit of flirting with a brunette across the counter, Lucas was approached by the manager and asked if he planned on buying anything or just holding up the servers. Lucas skedaddled after that.

And so when the boys were scuffing their shoes with no idea of what to do, something sparked within Mike.

"I, uh, I have something to pick up."

All bored and with nothing to do, the three followed to Mike's humiliation. "No, you don't need to come, seriously."

"Mike it's okay, it's always good to have support when you're getting your first bra."

Dustin's joke fell short but the message came across pretty clearly.

"What's so important and secretive that we can't be around?" asked Will concerned.

"It's nothing really...just...goddamn it you'll find out soon enough."

Mike trudged away and the other three, with a short glance of confusion followed Mike on his journey to his next destination.

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After picking up the right shade of foundation, concealer, powder and blush, Cassidy found a plastic bag full of disposable triangular sponges and a couple of cheap brushes and a small pot of golden shimmery powder stuff that she called 'highlighter'. She added a mascara before she forgot and a brand new toothbrush, floss, deodorant, and an emergency pack of menstrual pads, before

hightailing it out of the Drug Fair where they would spend a majority of their time in a nice lingerie store.

It was a word that Eleven was still unable to pronounce due to its confusing lettering, but Cassidy had helped with no scepticism on her part to Eleven's relief.

Cassidy assessed from a quick look behind Eleven's jeans what size she was most comfortable before getting some multipacks of cotton underwear. A shop assistant helped measure Eleven's chest when the said girl looked blank when asked what size she was around her chest.

"She's from Iceland, not everything translates well," Cassidy explained. The shop assistant with bright purple eyeshadow and overly hair sprayed do simply responded "Ah," before grabbing her tape.

After getting some comfortable t-shirt bras for her, Cassidy found her new acquaintance staring in awe of a blonde model on an advertisement for the brand new Wonderbra from Gossard. It was a push-up bra. The tagline had something to do with "driving the boys wild".

"Why would you want to drive a boy wild?" Eleven asked when she felt Cassidy's presence beside her. "Surely that would make them...frightening?"

Cassidy smiled at the interpretation, "It's sexist advertising that insists we wear bras for men - which in a lot of ways is part of the reason bras exist - to keep them perky for Western men. I'm going on a rant. Sorry."

"What does sexist mean?"

Oh, Cassidy had a lot to teach. But now wasn't the time, nor the place.

"I'll give you the Manifesto later. There's a lot of history. But I think the easiest answer for you is that men shouldn't stare at your chest or see it as a priority unless you want them to. Plus, Wonderbras are

stupid expensive when I know a cheaper brand my cousin buys with virtually the same effect."

"Mike covered his eyes when he walked in on Will helping me put mine on today."

"That doesn't surprise me in the least El," Cassidy said with an amused smile, realising why Mike Wheeler may have been more flustered than she'd ever witnessed of him in classes.

"Does he not want to stare at my chest?" El asked as she saw a bunch of guys looking at the display window advertising the Wonderbra to the unwashed masses.

Cassidy's eyes narrowed, careful not to be seen watching the boys when she recognised the busted up face of Troy Donovan leering with his friends, the girl pulled Eleven closer, her back to the entrance of the shop, effectively covering Cassidy from their view.

Unsure as to how to answer this question with her own personal beliefs, Cassidy looked for the least condescending way to do so. "I'm sure in time he will, but I don't think Mike will do anything that you're not comfortable with - he seems too respectful for that. Besides, there's more to life than pleasing the opposite sex. You've got to live for yourself too El."

Eleven nodded, for once fully understanding just what a perfect stranger had said to her and what that meant for her in the long run. She liked Mike, but Cassidy was right. She had to live for herself too.

---

Mike stood in front of Oppenheimer's Emporium, a jewellery store that had been in Mike's repertoire for some time. Lucas looked at the store and then back to Mike. Dustin looked quite impressed and Will couldn't help but smile and pat Mike on the shoulder.

"Bit soon for an engagement ring, isn't it Mike?"

Mike glared at his best friend and squinted his eyes at the stupidity of such a suggestion.

"I'm not getting her a ring asshole. I've got something on the books."

"Something on the books?" Dustin questioned with a curious smile.

"We can wait out here Mike," Will suggested kindly, trying to give his friend some slack.

"Hell no, I want to see what Mike's 'got on the books'," Dustin protested, immediately walking into Oppenheimer's before another word could be uttered on the matter.

The opulent store glittered from the thousands of things on display, reflecting from the store lights. There was a couple looking at rings and an older gentleman wearing a nice suit with a trench coat over his arm finishing a purchase with a saleslady, while a much older looking man could be seen polishing some unseen jewellery or diamond.

Dustin was about to walk up to him before Mike stopped him.

"No, not him. Just wait Dustin."

The testiness in Mike's voice was enough for Dustin to put his hands up in surrender. Will and Lucas were behind him, looking around curiously, waiting for Mike to push himself toward a counter.

As the older gentleman walked out the store, the saleslady was more visible to the boys, her big black perm and her dark purple dress with accentuated shoulder pads, a fake beauty spot and an intimidating look, saw the boys with an air of scrutiny before her frightening icy blue eyes landed on Mike and her face dropped, a sparkling white smile emitting as brightly as the diamonds she was surrounded by.

"Well, well, well, Mr Wheeler," her velvety voice echoed, an accent from the East coast rumbling through, "You've certainly grown."

"Hello Miss Oppenheimer," Mike said with a small smile.

"As much as it's a pleasure to see you again, I do hope you're here to make your final payment," She smiled knowingly.

"Final payment?" Will couldn't help but ask.

Miss Oppenheimer smiled slyly as she leaned over the glass case

counter and said, "Who are your friends Michael?"

"This is Will, Dustin and Lucas," Mike quickly went through pointing them out one by one. "I didn't think they'd be here, but they were too damn nosy to leave me be."

"Language Mike," Lucas said under his breath, his tenacity to always be respectful within the company of adults shining over his need to support his friend.

"I suppose it's not every day a teenage boy walks into a jewellery store," Miss Oppenheimer stated with clear reminiscence on her mind. "Well, you got the money or am I holding onto your gift for another year until you decide to mosey on in again?"

Mike pulled out his wallet and asked, "How much do I owe you still?"

Miss Oppenheimer held up a manicured fingernail and walked behind the counter to a drawer, pulling out a piece of paper. Her heels click-clacked along the cream tiled floor and she had an official invoice with a few scribbles here and there. Pulling out some glasses to read the finer printed ink, faded with a little age and stained by a coffee mug, the three other boys unintentionally leaned in to sneak a peek.

Dustin gasped and Lucas and Will followed up with cartoon-like bulging eyes

"You started this back in '83?"

"Mike that's a *lot* of money!"

"Who the hell is E.J.?"

The last one came from Will who was clearly confused by the initials. Lucas and Dustin took their time to come down from their own personal questions on the matter before wondering the same of Will's immediate thoughts on the matter.

"Stands for Jane - you know, the other name," Mike said quietly.

"Why didn't you put 'M' there instead, kind of feels like the present indicates more than just simple friendship," Dustin pointed out.



"Because that would be mighty presumptuous of me," Mike spoke honestly.

Miss Oppenheimer coughed, her eyes narrowing on the boys as they stepped back from a force they didn't know she had. She looked a little more softly at Mike before asking, "Shall we continue Michael?" He nodded gratefully toward her and said,

"Thank you, Miss Oppenheimer."

"You know my damn name well enough now Michael."

"Sorry...Regina," Mike said with a small smile.

She smiled in return and looked back at the invoice. "Okay, so, you paid most of this off last year...all that's left is," and she looked back at the boys who were eavesdropping and from a clear glare and zero trust in them, she gestured Mike closer with the pointy manicured fingernail on her index finger.

She whispered in Mike's ear and he nodded, checking his wallet and sighing when he said, "Looks like it'll have to be next time Regina."

He handed over a ten dollar note and she sighed too, "Well, you're just that bit closer Michael, that's more than I can hope."

Suddenly, a twenty dollar note was smacked down on the counter next to them, the hand it belonged to being Will's.

"That's all he needs, right?" Will asked.

Miss Regina Oppenheimer looked down at the invoice and smirked, "Sharp eyes kid."

"Will I can't let-"

"Shut up Mike," Will said in the friendliest way possible, a smart smile on his mouth.

"So the girl's back in town?" Miss Oppenheimer surmised quickly.

"Yes, she's back in town," Will answered before Mike could say

anything.

"So what has Mike 'had on the books' these last three years?"

Regina glared slightly at Mike who shrunk somewhat, before turning back to Will, Dustin and Lucas behind him watching on with curiosity, "Your friend Mike got lucky coming across me the day he did. I don't let people often layby one of our least costly items, and my father outright refuses it, but your boy here hit a soft spot so I just couldn't turn him away. You don't spread that story around or I'll get some very pissed off customers coming in, understood?"

"Yes Ma'am," Lucas said quickly, the others nodding eagerly. Mike was now leaning over the counter, fairly embarrassed at all these revelations coming out in front of his closest friends.

In the same drawer from whence she pulled the original invoice of '83, a square white box, too big for a ring to Dustin's disappointment, with the gold writing of Oppenheimer's printed on top with a little gold bow for emphasis, was placed in front of Mike, who still hadn't looked up from his pure embarrassment.

"Can we see it, Mike?" Will asked carefully.

Mike took a moment before standing up and opening the box carefully. there was some protective foam on top which he removed to find the solid gold bangle and it's very few embellishments staring at him, his memories flooding back from that December he spent shovelling people's driveways for money.

He remembered Nancy giving him a five dollar note when she found out about his plan, how it barely dented the price but it was the thought that counted.

How Regina, with all her intimidation and know how gave Mike the time of day when he didn't necessarily deserve it, but he guessed she felt sympathy for the red nosed twelve-year old that had walked in cluelessly, hopeful and naive of Eleven's chances of coming back. He'd lied about her, that she had left town but that he was hoping she'd move back one day. First love seemed to burn away at Regina's policies and she argued her father down until he threw his hands up

and walked out back. He wasn't a huge fan of Mike's to say the least and so he avoided him like the plague when he came in over the last three years.

The bangle, with two letters, one E and one J either side of a gold heart with a small diamond in one of the curved sections glared at him with a sense of reckoning a year ago. He had realised then it was likely that once he paid off the gift that he would bury it - as a way of giving her what she deserved in life with her six feet under instead. It was bittersweet at the time.

Now it's golden sheen didn't taunt him with 'Never'. It brought him the new face he saw wave goodbye not fifteen minutes ago to him, a renewed sense of being in her second chance knowing she'd not disappear despite what his paranoia screamed at him 24/7 since he reunited with her this morning.

Mike smiled at Regina, "Thank you, for keeping it safe for me."

Regina felt the emotion reverberate from his very being as he looked down at the bangle and all it signified to him after some gruelling years and she smiled kindly to him. "I'm glad she came back, Michael."

---

Somewhat slumping on a chair in the food court, Eleven decides that while shopping is fun it can also be tiring and a little tedious when it comes to the boring stuff, and it's dark outside which tells her how time-consuming it's all been. There are bags of all different shapes and sizes around her and she doesn't think she's seen so much stuff *all for her* in one go.

Her new friend Cassidy comes up to the table piled high in bags and slides over a tall cup that has a lid and straw. It's a bright shade of blue that she's never seen in food before.

"I didn't know what you'd like so I just got you blue raspberry, seems to be the most popular flavour. I prefer cherry."

Eleven sipped at the straw, and nearly spits it out at the feeling of the texture, but holds herself together to swallow.

"Shit sorry! I should've explained. It's a slushie - maybe they don't have those in Iceland?"

Eleven shakes her head and tries it again now she knows what she's in for. It's very cold and sugary, but it doesn't taste bad, and the texture melts in her mouth upon touching her tongue.

"Cool," she remarks with a smile to Cassidy. Cassidy begins to smile as El begins to enjoy herself, although maybe sips too quickly the third time.

"Ah! Why does it hurt?!"

"You have to sip it slowly otherwise you'll get a brain freeze," Cassidy seethed in realisation again, "I'm doing such a great job of giving you a heads up."

Eleven laughs, catching onto the sarcasm which she'd only grasped from the dictionary definition of it.

She notices over the few minutes they're sitting alone in the food court that Cassidy's mouth is slowly getting more red.

"Are you bleeding?" El asked with worry in her tone. Cassidy touches her mouth in regards to her concern and comes away with nothing, only to chuckle slightly. "One last thing with the slushies, they'll stain your mouth. Yours is blue - mine is red."

"Really?" Eleven asked in some wonder.

Cassidy nodded and wrangled her small handbag from the floor, pulling out the tortoiseshell compact mirror her mother insisted she kept with her at all times and flipped it open to show Eleven the evidence. Eleven gasped and covered her mouth, giggling in spite of herself.

Cassidy smiled and put the compact away. "It'll go away once you brush your teeth when you get home."

"Oh good," Eleven giggled again. She wasn't sure how appealing a blue mouth was to look at all the time, "I don't think blue is my colour."

"Don't worry, red isn't mine either," Cassidy laughed.

So this was what living for oneself felt like?

Eleven didn't mind it at all.

---

When the boys arrived by the table, they could see Eleven having the time of her life with Cassidy and Will was forced to say it. "Looks like Cassidy is definitely sticking around for a while."

"It's a risk," Mike insisted.

"A risk that's making El pretty damn happy," Lucas admitted, "Besides she gives me lots of anti-government vibes."

"Well, she rightly would with her heritage," Dustin spoke softly.

Mike sighed resigning himself to the fate before him. "Fine, she can stay. But she's on a probationary period. And *no one* can tell her the truth."

"Obviously. She'd think we were insane," said Lucas sharply.

Will lead the somewhat melodramatic group of his friends toward the table where El and Cassidy camped out waiting for them to return from their secret errand.

"Oh hey," Cassidy greeted, "I'm showing El the great big world of how not to drink a slushie."

"I got my first brain freeze!" El announced like it was a big deal.

"Accidentally. Forgot to warn her about that," Cassidy admitted sheepishly.

Dustin stole the drink from Eleven, as he regaled her with a tale of a slushie-pocalypse that hit the Fair Mart one year when someone with a vengeance against the owner put fliers all around town for a free slushie for a day in the hottest month of summer.

"Did you manage to get everything?" Will asked Cassidy with the

intention of being discreet. She nodded and said, "But you won't be seeing any change. Your cousin had an eye on a nice matching set when we were in Glenda's Lingerie."

"That's fine, Mom got the money out with the intention she could spend it any way she wanted," Will brushed off with ease. "And thanks, for doing that. The guys are especially weird about that stuff."

"You don't need to tell me twice. I heard all about the walk in from earlier today," Cassidy smiled in mild amusement.

Lucas nudged Mike when he checked the time, seeing the perfect image of his concerned mother going in on him for such little communication all the while just getting off from being the next cage fighter of Hawkins High.

"I think we're going to have to get going soon, guys."

"And by soon, he means now," Lucas reiterated, taking a hold of two of the bags from the table, as Dustin picked one up and Will took another two.

There was only one bag left and Mike grabbed it before Eleven could even try for it, holding it out his hand in a reinvigorated sense of courage he couldn't find a few hours ago. She smiled and took it as Cassidy walked alongside Will, much to Dustin's dismay.

Just as Eleven let her hand fall from Mike's, he slipped it through his arm, which warmed her to no end.

But that feeling didn't last, not when she felt like intuitively, she was being watched.

Her paranoia picked up quickly as she continued to walk with Mike, holding his arm and carefully looking around. What she found alleviated her original worry, but it still didn't feel good to have eyes on her, even if they were a bunch of teenage loiterers with a few clearly staring down the lanky boy next to her.

Eleven tried to think nothing of it until they arrived at the parking lot. Within sight of Lucas' car down a long row of others, Eleven turned to see the group following them. She felt a peculiar sense of

familiarity, but what could it be when she couldn't remember much of her last time in Hawkins with the exception of the four boys who currently her company.

Mike seemed to catch on when he felt her head turn around the third time.

"El, what's up?" he asked with concern.

It didn't take long for the memory of the Quarry to be pulled up, wherein which Mike jumped off the edge to save Dustin from being cut up by what was essentially a boy who shouldn't have found a knife, because El certainly made him regret it.

But regret turned into hatred and turned into revenge. And she felt it come off him with heat and despise, as he stared down Mike. El felt herself rise to the challenge.

"Mouth Breather."

It didn't take a rocket scientist to figure out she was talking about Troy Donovan. And he was backed up with more than James and Brock behind him.

They were only so many yards to Lucas' car when Mike looked behind his shoulder and rolled his eyes, deciding to just keep going closer to the car. He wanted to avoid the girls getting in the crosswires of what was obviously going to be a violent confrontation and what made Mike speed up and away wasn't the fear of being beaten up. It was the fear that Troy or James would recognise El and that she would no longer be safe.

"El whatever happens," Mike began to whisper as he continued to look on ahead to the rest of the group, "I need you to stay hidden. They - they can't see you - not your face at least. Donovan has a big mouth and last time -"

"Hey, Frogface - you're walking mighty quick to get away from me!"

The rest of the group turned, the boys clearly panicked. Cassidy looked solely unimpressed once more as she pulls Lucas towards the car to at least unlock it. Troy, sporting a black eye and some

bandages, is flanked by Brock and James who haven't got a single scratch on them from the previous day's incident. There are about two more guys behind him, who Mike recognises to be Juniors, with two of the girls being Juniors and Stacey, who is lighting up a cigarette and clearly preparing for a second performance with what they're expecting to be a different outcome with the extra muscle and the girls to impress.

The boys are outnumbered. They won't touch the girls, it's not the way. And El can't risk being exposed. She holds onto Mike's arm, refusing to follow his words.

"What do you want Donovan? A repeat?" Mike gritted out angrily. He felt Will step up beside, pushing El effectively out of sight and behind Mike, but she is adamant not to let go of him.

"Don't be so fucking sure of yourself Frogface - I don't think your nerdy ass and your faggy friends could go up against the likes of us."

"Do you ever take a day off from being a complete ass, Donovan?" Dustin comes up beside Will.

Lucas and Cassidy are filling the trunk with the purchases while the warring groups are distracted, Lucas knowing the minute they get beat, they'll probably rob them just for kicks. With the final bag in, Lucas slams the trunk closed.

Lucas hands Cassidy the keys. "We're going to be here a while."

"I'll try to defuse the situation," Cassidy says with a groan.

"No, you need to get El away from the situation. Things tend to get hairy when she's involved," Lucas impedes on Cassidy.

"Fine," Cassidy relents as the keys jingle in her hand. They walk back to the group cautiously, Cassidy about to gently pull Eleven away when the next thing is brought up in the fighting words.

"And I thought you were being a fucking coward Midnight, hiding away like the little co-," Brock sneered.

Lucas is about to push through with fists at the ready as Brock doesn't



need to finish his sentence, it having been years since Lucas was last called anything with that heavy sense of gravity to it, but it certainly made an impact after so long. Will and Dustin are forced to hold him back as the group laughs. Eleven doesn't understand the sudden outburst from Lucas but knows it must be pretty significant for him to feel so outraged.

"I figured you would be trying to hide your Dad's side gig Brock - or is the Ohio chapter no longer in operation after the CIA put him in prison," Dustin retorted with significant ease.

Cassidy snorted in disbelief and grand amusement and the boys looked to him with shining admiration for that blow.

Brock went a furious red, with both shame and anger toward the curly haired boy who turned out to know a lot more about the secretive new bully than he let on.

"Your dad's a Klansman?" James spoke in mild shock.

"You all seemed pretty okay with the diet racism before," Will mentioned with disgust to their hypocrisy.

Brock launched himself toward Dustin when Cassidy jumped in the way which inevitably forced Brock to stumble and blunder it so he wouldn't hit a girl. Violence against girls was apparently too far.

"I think the Sharks versus Jets number can take place another time, don't you?"

"Oh no, not this time Fox," spat one of the Junior boys, an olive-skinned short guy with hair as styled as a Hair rock band's lead singer, a shake of his head condescendingly, "You fucked it up last time by letting it become an unfair fight for my boy Troy. Either get out the way or find yourself getting hit."

"Don't you *fucking* dare," Dustin pushed himself forward but Mike pushed them both back behind him fiercely.

"This is between you and me Donovan, no one else needs to be involved," he said as he stared him down.

Donovan smiled sadistically, "That's right. All I did was comment on your dead girlfriend and you went fucking psycho on me."

Mike felt Eleven's grip tighten around his arm, his heart beating a mile a minute with her present at hearing all of this.

He would have to explain it later, likely while he was in the hospital recovering from his injuries or in another state because his super-powered crush took matters into her own hands. Now was not the time or the place.

"Just you and me, Donovan," Mike repeated. Half his face couldn't quite make the smile, but he could see the self-satisfied grin in Troy's eyes as he finally came to terms with the conditions. After all, Mike couldn't catch him unawares this time. But he was about to do the same.

Troy pilfered through his pocket when he found his latest purchase and placed the knuckleduster on his right hand. Mike's eyes widened when he realised just how fucking nuts Troy Donovan was.

"Round Two Wheeler."

"Troy," Cassidy pleaded, "You don't need to do this."

It seemed to be her last amnesty to a clearly demented teenage boy, who simply looked at her, head tilted as he squinted his less busted up eye at her with disappointment.

"This is a *different* issue, Fox. And you chose your side. You'll regret that soon enough," the venom dripping in his near threat.

Cassidy's whole body straightened up at that and she shook her head as she glared at him. Her last resolve had broken.

She said one last thing, "When you eventually get off your high, just remember this. I fucking tried."

Will patted her on the shoulder, not sure of what went down but wanting her to be as far away as possible from the inevitable.

Mike took a second step forward into a formed circle Lucas taking El's

hand away from Mike's arm.

"It's just something he needs to do," Lucas whispered to her painfully.

She was in view of one of Troy's flanks. James had finally got a glimpse of the girl hiding behind Mike Wheeler when something seemed to filter through from three years ago. There was an imminent sense of danger flooding his veins.

But he never got to warn Troy.

A fancy car enters the strip of road that accesses the row of undercover parked cars, lights blaring from the darkened winter night, screeches to a stop right beside them. The Police is playing from what is a black 4 door Mercedes Benz, and Troy is about to tell them where they can go and get lost.

He's alone as he steps out the car, lights still illuminating their confrontation with the winter air swirling in its ambience. While such numbers should intimidate even the oldest and most authoritative of adults trying to tell some kids to knock it off and separate, the influence that ripples from this young man is enough to get their attention and immediately defuse the tension in a way Cassidy couldn't accomplish.

The young man flicks the cigarette he's finished and closes the door to the car.

The hair, the suave stance as he leaned against his car and the wealthiness that surrounded him with such ease and confidence was enough to tell who it was.

"Steve?" Mike said with some surprise.

His slight smirk found his way to his visage when he eyed his ex-girlfriend's little brother.

"Yeah. We got a problem here?"

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*Author's Note:*

Yikes.

*So it's been a while. Like over a year lol.*

*Basically, I lied when I said I had all the chapters planned out. Now I actually do.*

*I'm not going to be as busy this year and I guess in sole anticipation of the July premiere of Season Three, I decided to finish this before the canon got even further away from this story. It's inevitable, but I'd rather post this first and then watch what the Duffer Brothers have in store for me.*

*In preparation, I decided to cut this chapter down a bit to add some more cliffhangers. This is definitely still a thirty chapter fic, doesn't need to be any longer because any one-shots will be in the series but separate from this set of chapters.*

*I've also planned out a second fanfic that is far more AU in the plot.*

*But I don't want to start that until this is finished, which I have better feeling it will be.*

*This is the Madonna song title chapter I was talking about in chapter 8's notes that I ended up pushing to another chapter to add some stuff about another OC called Zemora to add a bit more build up for her part in the story. It's purely Stranger Things Kids (turned to Teens) based until I give you a heads up when it's more Adult character-centric, although they're going to gradually get more split up between perspectives when the chapters start to get a bit more frantic in plot.*

*I hope you enjoy this chapter.*

*I haven't discontinued or abandoned this fic. Hopefully more to come soon.*

*Fadinggx*

## 11. The Dreams of Children

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### Chapter Eleven

#### The Dreams of Children

"Why don't you mind your own goddamn business, Harrington!"

"Troy shut the fuck up," James said under his breath threateningly. He seemed to be trying to hide from Steve's view and had significantly shrivelled before then to the group's disappointment.

After glancing over at the guilty looking James, Steve looked directly at Troy, taking in the bruised and bloodied face after a day of healing. Steve knew what that felt like, knew what the humiliation could boil down to. If Troy Donovan, a kid almost as invincible as he was in high school got beaten up, there was a chance he pushed someone too far - just as Steve had pushed Jonathan Byers that day.

"That's just the thing, sometimes it is," Steve said, pulling out a pack of cigarettes from his jacket pocket. He pulled one out and lit it up with a silver lighter from his jean pocket. After taking a puff, he started again.

"Tell me, Donovan, how happy would your mother be if she found out you got yourself into another fight so soon after being beaten to the ground?"

He took in another two tokes of his cigarette when Troy simply stared at him as though he desired for God to strike him where he stood. Steve smiled.

"Dear old gullible Patty will start to see a pattern soon - maybe stop believing in your bullshit when she finds all that paraphernalia you got - that knife you showed off to Tommy a year ago and now knuckledusters," Steve points out with the cigarette in his hand. He almost laughs when he says, "You really think you're some gangbanger don't you?"

"And you're the pussy who got beat up by the fairy's brother - some of us choose not to fucking keel over when someone gets one over on us. King Steve my ass."

Steve's free hand comes to his chest, in mock pain, before taking another drag of his cigarette.

"I appreciate the effort in trying to at least puncture me, Donovan. I'm sure those fighting words will suddenly disappear when Daddy Donovan finds out that you're not in fact at some extracurricular or volunteer work you bullshit to him about."

He seethes then as he adds, "And I worry about how your behaviour will reflect on Daddy's professional ties he has with us - works not been so good as of late for him I hear. Is that why you've been acting out, so?"

Troy's face is scrunched up, nostrils flaring. He seems to make a decision from all these underlying threats Steve has gathered from his own town gossip and business relationships and fumbles with his hand, his aggression only making his new copper knuckledusters more difficult to get off.

"Oh and the reason your friend over there is nearly shitting himself in fear - yeah I see you Lockwood - is because my family owns the property his Daddy's business is running out of. Be mighty hard on you if he found out your dumbass actions put his business in jeopardy, wouldn't it?" Steve said with a smile so empty of warmth that a chill went up the aforementioned's spine. He took another drag, a long one that took its time as the exhale swirled out of him.

"But you figured that out quicker than Donovan, which I guess isn't difficult when his head has been knocked about. Are you sure you don't have a concussion?"

"Go fuck yourself, Harrington," Troy said, one of the juniors trying to aim some spit at Steve's feet.

Steve laughs genuinely as he says, "Oh stop acting like you grew up in rough homes - you're not authentic bullies. Your house has a fucking bidet Donovan and your favourite meal is fucking mac and

cheese, just the way Patty makes it - out of the packet," he says as he rubs his belly.

Donovan had turned around at this point and was giving Steve the finger. Stacey looked highly insulted by this waste of time but follows her older friends as she sees Steve looking at her with a sense of familiarity that feels threatening to her.

Steve is at the end of his cigarette before he puts it out, stubbing it with his foot. He leans back against the car and looks at the boys before him.

"That Stacey, she's Carol's sister isn't she?"

Dustin nods in answer.

Steve smiles knowingly, "She's got her reasons to be running too."

Before the group can leave, El being placed strategically behind Mike again, Steve stops the group with a very adult sounding tutting.

"And just where do you dipshits think you're going? I save your sorry asses from being whooped and I don't even get a thank you?"

"Thanks, Steve, but we had it handled," Mike insisted plainly.

"No we didn't," Lucas said in disbelief at Mike's claims.

"You want to explain to me what happened on the way home? I assume that's where you're heading out at this time of night?" Steve said as he stood up fully, getting ready to unlock his car. "Unless there's another riot scheduled you need to be getting to?"

"We are going home, but we're taking Lucas' car," Dustin answered him.

"All six of you are going home in that tiny ass Cadillac?"

"Hey, it's bigger on the inside!" Lucas defended his pride and joy.

"But you're not wrong either," Will added honestly.

"Great. You coming, Mike? We can have a nice little chat. You can bring your new friend with you too," Steve said, highly suggestive of their coupling which had Mike closing his eyes in regret that Steve had ever turned up.

"I'll come too," Will said as he almost magnetically appeared by Eleven's side, as a second barrier to Steve's poking and prodding to such a 'nice little chat'.

"I'm going to drop Cassidy home before I come to yours Mike," Lucas suggested helpfully, and Mike nodded in agreement.

"Alright, you coming Henderson?" Steve looked pointedly at Dustin.

"Ahh, no, I'll give Lucas the company," Dustin said with a mild stutter.

Steve looked between Dustin and Lucas and it didn't click until his eyes fell on Cassidy, a smile filled with secrets over compassing his chill demeanour. "Oh, sure, you do that."

Dustin glared at him before Lucas called to his attention again.

"I call shotgun," Mike said with very little enthusiasm.

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The car somehow doesn't smell like cigarettes but like pine trees, and so Mike figures it's not actually Steve's car, but maybe his mom's. El is smoothing the leather seat underneath her, it's brand new texture less roughened, less so than Lucas' seats must be pleasant for her to touch. Will is looking out the window next to El in the back seat, completely at a loss as to how to hold a conversation in this scenario. After all, Troy pointed out that his brother did beat up the driver once.

"What are you doing in Hawkins? Aren't you meant to be in college?" Mike uncomfortably asked. He wasn't sure if it was overstepping his boundaries, but it was early November and Nancy left back in August and Thanksgiving wouldn't be for another week or two, not that she'd waste the trip on the most boring holiday ever.

"I'm at Chicago State, studying business, but I had to come home a little earlier. My grandpa is terminally ill and he's one of the only



decent members in my family, so I want to see him before he goes."

Mike is horrified that that had to be the answer.

"I - uh, Steve, I didn't know man - uh..." Mike looked down at his lap before he could fumble his words anymore. He wasn't fantastic with this sort of stuff when it was sprung on him with no prior warning.

"I'm so sorry to hear that," a softer voice emitted from behind Mike, and he looks up into the rearview mirror to see Steve taking a glance in it to look at El.

Will too seemed at odds with El's confidence to utter one of the most common sympathies given upon such news where Mike flustered. El had clearly read a lot more than either Mike or Will had anticipated from her small collection if she understood such notions.

Steve smiled bitterly in the rearview, glancing once at Mike before looking back in the rearview to address El.

"It's old age, nothing too drastic, just a part of life. But thanks," Steve responded kindly, receiving a very small and shy smile, one that was being very careful if Steve were to truly examine it. "I never actually got your name?"

Will looks at Steve suddenly at this question, and as El is about to answer, Mike interrupts.

"Her name is El, she's Will's cousin from Iceland and there's nothing else you need to know."

The fairly threatening stare that comes from Mike is interpreted very differently from what Steve sees bubbling from the boy's emotions.

"Woah there buddy, I'm not about to swoop in on your girl. Be a bit strange after I dated Nance," Steve mentions with amusement as Mike leans his head back against the headrest, feeling the burn on his porcelain freckled cheeks for the hundredth time that day.

"El isn't my girlfriend, Steve," Mike implores quietly, in hopes she won't hear it.

"Uhuh, sure pipsqueak," Steve snickers before turning up The Police again.

The ride went onward with some peace, although as time passes, Mike's leg jitter gets far more difficult to avoid, as does Will's habit to bite his fingers while under stress. But what is most distracting is the girl in the backseat of his car, simply existing.

There was something off with her, how the two boys react as if anything she says will be an explosion and the name just won't go away from his mind. The immediate denial from Mike for being connected to her on a more intimate level also forced Steve to remember how depressed he was for some time when 'The Incident' was ever brought up. Steve only saw one part of it, and for the sake of clarity, Nancy had filled him in on some big pieces of the puzzle, including a girl that the boys, in particular, Mike, had taken a liking to.

Steve recalled the date that everything went down as the 12th of November 1983. He couldn't, and wouldn't forget the date he came across his girlfriend at the time wielding a gun as Byers set up traps in a house covered in Christmas lights. The day he turned around from being a coward and walked back in when shit was just getting real for Nancy and Jonathan with an otherworldly creature that Steve could never imagine in his wildest childhood nightmares.

From the few times that he'd hung out with Dustin, after a strange run in two years before that involved him finding Mews stuck in an abandoned house, he was told that the creature had been dubbed the Demogorgon. No geekier a name could be found in Steve's opinion. Dustin had brought him some more solace than Nancy in all her grieving couldn't. But when it came to the girl, Dustin couldn't ever quite bring himself to talk about her either, just saying how powerful and special she was, how she had been mistreated and should have lived.

From the looks of this girl, she was just another Hawkins teen that was just barely a blip on Steve's radar before now - especially if the story of being Icelandic and Byers' cousin was true.

He could see some sort of connection between the girl and Will,

something that couldn't be denied. But familial wouldn't have been Steve's first guess - when they looked nothing alike and seemed to have starkly different demeanours but seemed magnetic in ways that Steve couldn't comprehend.

Even stranger, when he remembered that it was no ordinary Friday.

"It's weird isn't it, that I run into your group on the 12th of November?" Steve starts carefully, glancing carefully at the three, his eyes using the mirror to see his backseat passengers, Mike out the corner of his eye. The teenage boy next to him froze at the mention and while Will looked at Steve, he quickly looked back out the window and concentrated on pretending like things weren't coming closer to the surface.

"We try not to talk about it," Mike's voice stiff and becoming quite defensive, "After what Will went through."

"Of course, that was insensitive of me Byers," Steve says genuinely apologetically, feeling the similar glare from Mike that Nancy had given Steve enough times when he was acting like a tool.

Steve almost wanted to applaud Mike. He was really trying to keep him off the scent. But as they get closer to the Wheeler house, he can't stop himself from looking at the girl in the backseat.

There is clearly great affection and admiration there, and Steve knows all about that - but there is something else that can't be defined by his lived experiences.

It's a protectiveness, that won't yield even when close to the brink of sacrifice.

And Steve was pretty sure Mike wasn't like that for all the girls.

---

Steve pulled up in front of the Wheeler house in the cul-de-sac and put the car in park. He turned quickly to the girl named El in the backseat of his car, and smiled politely at her, to which she returned with unease.

"It was a pleasure to meet you El," Steve said sincerely.

El swallowed away her initial judgement of him, as he practically tormented her friends with questions that were getting dangerously close to the truth for their little cohort.

"It was lovely to meet you too," El responded in kind and left the car. As Will opened the car door, Steve said, "Hey, hey, don't you boys be getting into any more trouble. I won't always be around to save the day."

Before Mike can inherently insult Steve as he would in the past, he narrowed his eyes on him and decided against it.

"Thanks for the ride, Steve."

There was no enthusiasm behind it. Any of Mike's enthusiasm had completely vanished the minute Steve started the Spanish Inquisition. It would only return when Eleven was safely in his basement with his friends as protection.

"Any time kid," Steve responded with a small knowing smile. It put Mike rightly on edge.

And just as Mike was about to walk off, Steve rolled down the window and called out to him. Mike stopped, telling Will to carry on with El (and carry on with the plan).

"Tell that curly haired dipshit to not pull his punches - he'll understand."

Mike shook his head, refusing to wrap it around whatever the dynamic between Dustin and Steve was and took off down the small slope to his house.

Steve waited before Mike and his two friends were around the corner of the house to do what he planned next. His mom's present from his dad after being caught with a stripper while entertaining some overseas business associates happened to be the very car he sat in now, which was quite well built and included a car phone that sat behind the hand brake, idly covered by a lid. It was ridiculous, but boy was it useful right now.

Steve dialled the number he remembered from his phonebook and

waited as a few rings went through.

---

Iron Maiden is blasting obnoxiously in the apartment when Nancy gets home from grocery shopping, hauling four brown paper bags through an eight-floor walk up. She isn't pleased. There are more dishes in the sink than she thinks are in the cupboards and the phone is ringing.

"Cashmere! The phone is ringing!"

Her roommate is apparently too busy high off her ass as she rocks out to Iron Maiden - her current beau's favourite band because she couldn't be original. Nancy manages to find a clear space on the bench where she also finds a pair of red panties which she immediately throws off the bench to her disgust, plonking the groceries on top before she finally manages to reach the phone before it rings off the hook.

"Hello?" Nancy yells over the music.

*"Nance, is that you?"*

Nancy was quite surprised to hear the other voice over the phone. It had been two months since they last talked and he'd sounded pretty content with the way life was going.

"Steve? Hey, I wasn't expecting...oh God, what's wrong?"

*"Are you listening to Iron Maiden?"*

"My roommate is. She has terrible taste in men who have terrible taste in music," Nancy said with a crinkled nose at the memory of the current beau of Cashmere walking in the living room sweaty and naked, clearly after 'boinking' as Cashmere put it.

"Anyway, you didn't answer my question, is something wrong?"

*"Ah, depends on the gravity of the situation?"* Steve's voice crackled, *"Look, I'll keep to the important part. I saw Mike tonight - broke up a potential brawl between him and that little asshole Troy Donovan."*

Nancy snorted, "Yeah Mike beat him up yesterday. He's probably still pretty pissed about that lanky bag of bones getting one up on him - but he had it coming," she felt herself getting defensive. "Can't expect to talk smack about his sore spot without some sort of comeuppance."

"*The girl?*" Steve clarified.

"Yeah, the girl. Hey, it's nice that you broke up that fight -"

"*Well Donovan had knuckledusters on, so yes, you can thank me!*"

"Jesus," Nancy leaned against the bench, her body reacting in disbelief at her brother being faced with some real fucking damage, "What a fucking psycho...Okay, yes thank you for that - but there's not much I can do about that from here, and I don't think Mike will appreciate you snitching on him to me of all people Steve."

"*You might care a bit more when I tell you he had a girl with him tonight.*"

There was a sudden pause in Nancy's functioning because it was only the day before Mike refused to intimate the possibility of a girl in his love life.

"A girl?" Nancy said in further disbelief. "Was he with the group or was it just him and a girl?"

"*Two girls, and all four nerds,*" Steve answered simply.

Nancy rolled her eyes at the clear misinformation he was giving her to insight some sort of gossip, a typical Harrington habit he'd inherited from his mother.

"Well, there you go. One, these girls were likely friends with the boys. Two, if the boys are dating girls, it's likely going to be Lucas and Dustin. My brother is still too hung up from three years ago and Will's still going through shit."

"*No, no, no,*" Steve refused to be shut down where he felt himself running toward something very big. "*She was holding onto Mike's arm. I drove him, Byers and the girl home. Apparently, she's Byers' cousin from Iceland - you know anything about that?*"

"Honestly, no, I wouldn't know about that Steve," Nancy said, as though that should be obvious.

She heard him snort derisively on his end.

"And what's that supposed to mean?" she asks defensively.

*"You're still pretending there's nothing there with Jonathan?"*

Nancy scoffed in denial, "Even if I believed that and was in a relationship with him, I don't imagine that's information that would come up in normal conversation...I mean what did she even look like? Did you get her name?"

"Yeah," Steve replied, forgetting to rib her more about Jonathan, *"It was EL."*

Nancy almost felt the floor open up as her organs felt like they plunged through her body.

Her voice was quiet when she asked, "Could you repeat that?"

*"El, her name was EL."*

Yep, she had definitely heard it correctly the first time. She just thought she was having an aneurysm the first time. Her head was full of cotton as she looked at the date on the calendar, remembering quite clearly why she had called Mike yesterday.

Iron Maiden was screeching in her ears and her concentration was being invaded by some sycophantic idiot that she knew she couldn't live with much longer but had to put up with until Christmas, and that was when Nancy's mind in her current predicament, an overload of information and past trauma flooding back like a tsunami, snapped.

"Hold on for a moment Steve," Nancy said, her voice thick like Honey but he knew that meant danger in the last couple of years from Nancy.

*"Okay, Nance."*

She placed the phone on the one space left that was clear on the counter, very much intending to come back to it. She walked around the couch to the humongous stereo sitting on a case full of tapes. She incidentally found the plug and pulled it from the socket. The power down noise almost sounded like pure relief from the tech, that had been begging for a quick and instant death.

"Hey! You can't just turn off my music!"

Nancy stood on the coffee table opposite Cashmere and pulled her by her three thousand rubber necklaces, turning them to disable her from moving too quickly, to look her straight in the eye and at her level. Nancy, despite her short stature and tiny frame, glared down Cashmere in her attempt to look like Cherie Currie as she overwhelmed their dilapidated couch, no thanks to her thrashing about. It was sudden to her roommate that maybe she shouldn't have walked all over her at the beginning of the semester.

"I'm on the fucking phone Cashmere," Nancy said dangerously slow, "So I'd appreciate some quiet and you taking your dirty groupie ass to your room before I put you there permanently. Do I make myself clear?"

Cashmere nodded and felt the relief that was her windpipe was given some release from the necklaces.

"If you don't respect basic house rules, I'm going to smash it next time."

Cashmere scampered to her room and left Nancy in some peace and quiet for the first time since she reinvented herself as a member of The Runaways while on her trust fund a month ago.

Nancy stormed over to the phone and picked up the receiver again, speaking quite forward.

"Tell me everything you know Steve."

*"Your brother had eyes for her."*

"Oh, shit."

---



"Operation Sneak Eggos Past Concessions is underway." Will couldn't help but chuckle beside him as he took his bag and found himself at the front door and Eleven simply smiled in jest, not quite getting it from her limited experiences as Lucas remarked, "Why are we sticking with that name, couldn't we go with something simpler?"

Dustin, headset on and currently occupying an easily amused Holly with a magic trick he learned at a summer camp a year ago felt the need to retort, "It's a brilliant name and you know it, Lucas." The coin suddenly disappears from his hand and Holly looks quite shocked, but is no longer frightened of the possibilities, looking around in awe to find how he hid it again.

"You know you should've called me sooner Michael," Karen Wheeler said with a hint of disappointment in her voice in the kitchen, "I was really worried about you especially when you just ran out this morning - and you refused to give me an explanation."

"I'm really sorry, I just didn't - Look when it comes to Will I act before I think. I won't do it again mom," Mike spoke sweetly.

Karen sighed and shook her head, crossing her arms. "You're just lucky it's the twelfth of November, Michael Wheeler."

"I'll count my blessings, promise," he says as he hugs her, to her surprise. She warmly accepts it though, knowing that such affection from her teenage son will be far and few between until the next emotional year rolls forward to the same date.

The doorbell rings and Dustin calls out, "I'll get it, Mrs Wheeler!"

"Thank you, Dustin!"

Will turned up at the door with an overnight bag, pretending like he hadn't been hiding next to the house for a while. "Hi Dustin, is everyone here?"

"Just waiting on Lucas," Dustin says sickly serene.

"Hi Mr Wheeler," Will greets politely only to receive a grunt of recognition in return. It's what the group is hoping for most out of Mike's barely present father.

"I need to use the phone," Will says with a bit more extra oomph than he's used to portraying.

"Kind of overselling it buddy," Dustin critiqued.

"You played Pippin once in middle school Dustin," Will retorted.

"Kitchen," Holly says taking his one free hand, bringing them back to the present and trying to be helpful, somehow forgetting that this was practically Will's second home growing up.

The kitchen is about to become crowded when Will says hello and asks Karen to use the phone, having just stopped embracing her son. "Of course sweetie. Do you need to call your mom?"

"Yeah, she'll just be getting home now and I couldn't wait any longer to get over here so I left a note but you know how it is Mrs Wheeler," Will says with an underlying tone of tension.

"No need to explain to me, Will. I'm pretty sure your mom is on speed dial by this point."

"Thanks, Mrs Wheeler."

As Will calls up his Mom, the chaos slowly begins around him as the operation truly gets risky. Holly starts tugging on Dustin, whining at him to do another trick.

"Well if you insist Miss Holly Jolly, but - ugh the lighting is terrible in here. It's going to have to be in the dining room - better yet!" Dustin says as he stumbles over the plan, "The den. I'm quite sure your Dad hasn't seen Dustin the Extravagant display his skills yet."

"I thought you were Dustin the Magnificent," Holly questioned innocently.

"Tomato, tomato kid. It only really counts in the jazz hands at the end of the gig," Dustin says with a funny voice which has her crack up into little girl giggles as she drags him to the front room where Ted was situated.

"Oh I better make sure they don't annoy your father too much," Karen

says, not remotely thrilled about the prospect, whipping a tea towel over her shoulder.

As she walked out of the kitchen and headed toward the nice living room where Ted Wheeler was parked for the night, Mike hastily made his way to the back door, unlocking it.

"My Dad's zombie sensibilities will be the death of my Mom, but it will be the making of Operation Eggo."

As the lock unlatched, Lucas burst in with five bags and Eleven in tow with another.

"Go, go, go," Mike said eloquently as he rushed Eleven toward the staircase to the basement and grabbed all the bags from Lucas' grip, quickly following her down the stairs. He hid the bags under the stairs and rushed back up as he saw, with a little skip of his heart, that El was heading straight to familiar comfort of a blanket fort under his old desk.

Once he made his way back up the stairs, he comfortably parked himself in the kitchen, settling so quickly that when his Mom walked back in, she suspected nothing.

"What pizzas did you want me to order, honey?"

Mike started to write down the usuals plus the classic cheese pizza that he figured that Eleven would happily eat.

"Yeah, I'm sorry I can't make movie night Mom, but I'll be home tomorrow night."

*"Well don't hold yourself to that sweetie, I know what you boys are like when you're swept up in a campaign,"* Joyce Byers said with good humour.

"That's a good point Mom. I'll let you know sometime tomorrow how thrilling the latest saga in Mike's campaign is before I write myself to go home and mope in my room," Will says, a sense of false cheer to add to it to convince his Mom.

*"But you know if you want to come home, don't hesitate to call - Hopper is*

*working late and if I don't pick up he will - and if you can't stand it then tell Mrs Wheeler, I'm sure she'll understand."*

"Mom. I'll be fine," Will said somewhat shortly.

*"Okay sweetie," Joyce says resigned. "Just remember you can come home anytime. I love you, honey."*

"I love you too, Mom," Will says, but he can't stop the uncertainty in his voice. The deep feeling of her potential betrayal is almost too much. And lying to her was difficult after everything she'd been through three years ago.

What if she hadn't been involved at all? What if she would have been just as blindsided if she found out such news. And Will believed he couldn't trust her that whole time.

But Will couldn't deal with 'ifs'. The party couldn't risk everything on an 'if'.

"Enjoy the movie, okay?"

"I will, sweetie. Goodnight," Joyce said finally, bringing some relief to a struggling teenage boy.

"Goodnight Mom."

He hangs up, his heart feeling heavier than he predicted it would after talking with his Mom.

The doorbell rings soon enough again. Will is given an out.

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On high alert, the party decided against actually watching the movie on the screen in the basement, not that they haven't remembered 'A Last Hope' word for word by now. They keep it on as a background though, to keep any of the people upstairs unawares to the true ongoings of Mike Wheeler's basement. The boys are circled in their respective sleeping bags, surrounding the pizza and snacks in the middle.

Their long lost returned fifth member, Eleven, dressed in her new

flannel pyjamas from her shopping spree not too long ago has now added a few more things to her repertoire of experiences as she sits between Will and Lucas. She really likes cheese pizza. Mike is glad they kept that option alive despite some slightly different tastes in the group. Eleven is on her third piece, which reminds Will of how long ago the breakfast/lunch was earlier that day and feels immensely guilty about leaving her without a meal for so long.

Eleven brushed it off, "I used to eat once a day. Or at least I think it was a day."

"No way to tell the time back there?" Lucas asked curiously.

Eleven shakes her head, but it's not solemn so much as just a matter of fact. She then points to the can of Coca Cola. "What's this?"

"It's a drink, we call it soda," Dustin explains, "It consists of carbonated water, sugar and syrup."

El frowns at this explanation, not finding it very appealing until Lucas figuratively steps in. "It's lots and lots of bubbles in a drink so it feels a bit different in your mouth, but it's really sugary and sweet, so I have a feeling you'll like it."

Lucas clicks the tab open on a fresh can, a sizzling sound making her rather curious to its contents. Lucas handed it over, gesturing for her to bring it to her lips.

Eleven follows along and takes a mouthful. The four boys watch her curiously as she lets it hang around in her mouth. Her face says it all.

"Try swallowing it El," Will says, trying not to laugh at her predicament.

El shakes her head but knows it's going one way or another and it can't stay in her mouth.

Mike is stumbling to get up, about to pull Eleven to the basement bathroom to spit it out when she forces it down her throat and says, "No, I don't like that." This gets a laugh from Will and Lucas, mostly out of sheer surprise but Dustin is almost stone.

"It's coke," Dustin says in disbelief, "America's most beloved drink and you don't like it?"

Mike is settling back in before he asks, "What didn't you like about it?"

"It's attacking my mouth. I thought you said they were like bubbles," Eleven accused Lucas in jest, who can't stop laughing now at this unpredictable reaction.

"That's exactly what they are El, but millions of them probably don't feel like normal bubbles," Will explained to her.

"It's probably for the best, my dentist says it rots your teeth anyway," Lucas said with a shrug.

"Well, at least we can mark down an 'absolutely not' for coke for El in future," Mike said with an intrigued smile.

"Soda in general," El clarified with certainty before taking another bite into her cheese pizza, making Mike chuckle.

Mike gets up again but starts heading toward the stairs. "I'll get you something flat to drink instead. My Mom has a hoard of tropical juice boxes from a sale like two months ago."

He piled on the last remaining pizza slices into one box and heard some cries of disgust and protest at this action. Mike had forgotten that Lucas despises the olives anywhere near his pizza and that Will thinks pineapple is blasphemy near pepperoni.

"Oh get over it. I don't want Mom coming down to clean up after us, it's too much of a risk."

That fact alone hushed up the boys, Dustin throwing a Reese's Peanut Butter cup in Eleven's direction. "After you finish that slice, you gotta try the Peanut Butter Cup - and then we'll get you on Skittles."

"No way," Lucas disagreed, "The quintessential American snack is the Twinkie. El needs to try that first -"

"I'll have you know that that is crap Eleven," Dustin defended as she

watched this brewing argument, "Everyone knows that the quintessential American snack is the chocolate chip cookie - in particular the Chips Ahoy variety or better yet, homemade."

"Wrong again - Keebler's. As for homemade, Mrs Wheelers," Lucas butted in.

"And you're all forgetting that none of this matters because come summer, El will be trying the truest American confection known to man," Will steamrolls the debate, leaning in for slightly dramatic flair "The s'more."

Lucas and Dustin groan and moan in agreement and annoyance that it hadn't crossed their mind as El asks Will, "What's a...did you call it a s'more?"

"S'more," Will pronounces slowly for her. "It's the words 'some' and 'more' squished together because you'll want some more after you've had one."

"It's the perfect combination of a melted marshmallow over a fire, with chocolate and sandwiched between two graham crackers," Lucas says, practically drooling at the thought, making Eleven salivate from the description.

"Damn when was the last time we had one of those?" Lucas asked.

"Camping, over two years ago," Dustin recalled hazily, then speaking directly to Eleven, "Camping is the only suitable time to have them because you're likely to burn off all the calories."

"When can we go camping?" an undeniable eagerness in Eleven's voice.

"When it gets warmer. You can't really go camping in Winter comfortably, not in this state anyway," Will says pointing to the two heaters down in the basement down in the basement.

"Mom! I don't need your help!"

It was spoken a lot louder than was needed, but the group caught on quickly when the door to the basement opened revealing the

conversation more clearly.

"You watch your tone, Michael Wheeler! You'll break your neck carrying all that down the stairs, it won't just be your hands needing gauze!"

"Fine," Mike gritted out, "Guys! Make some space down there!"

Will helped Eleven up as she retreated to the blanket fort under the rickety old work desk. Dustin and Lucas were scrambling for an idea before Dustin came up with something.

"One second Mrs Wheeler, Lucas passed gas just a minute ago," Dustin called out.

"Shut up Dustin!"

While the denial was aimed at Dustin's lie, the unintended effect made its mark when Mike asked, "Are you still sure you want to go down there Mom?"

Eleven was comfortably situated, Will gesturing to stay very quiet. He pulled down the top blanket shortly afterwards and she was hidden from view completely when Karen insisted upon being let into her basement. She had managed to push her way in front of Mike and was now carrying a tray of cups with a plastic water jug on top.

"I highly doubt that whatever Lucas can do you can't do either Mike," she stated simply.

"Mom!"

The boys laughed, but it was far more menacing due to the hidden occupant who had Mike's fancy to the highest degree. The hysterics performed upon Mike's face and it only led to Dustin and Lucas laughing harder.

"Who knew the way to your funny bones was some vulgar humour," Mrs Wheeler shook her head, unable to fathom the minds of teenage boys. She placed the water jug on the floor and insisted they each drink a cup tonight. There was an incident during one of many of Mike's sleepovers that involved puke of which the matriarch didn't



wish to relive any time soon.

There were only four cups on the tray but when Lucas looked questioningly to his friend, Mike patted the baggy sweater he was wearing where the fifth plastic cup was hidden but bulging slightly above his hip, a juice box right next to it.

"Now was that so hard Michael?"

"Thank you Mom," Mike said to her with an underlying tone of impatience.

"Alright Mike, I know when I'm not wanted," Karen said warningly. She turned back and smiled back at the boys, "I'll be putting Holly to bed in an hour so I'd appreciate it if you boys kept it down to a nice level of quiet?"

"Yes Mrs Wheeler," the chorus went around the three boys and when she was satisfied with the responses, she smacked a kiss on Mike's head, despite him being taller than her now, forcibly bending him down to meet her lips.

"Alright, I love you Mom," Mike said, practically pushing her toward the staircase.

"And don't forget to set an alarm - you've still got to serve that detention tomorrow morning."

Most of Mike's patience was gone and all of his dignity felt stripped at his mom's idea of a joke, so he didn't hold back the pure annoyance that dripped in his voice, "I know Mom, I'll be up at 7 am!"

When the kitchen light slowly disappeared, the audible click of the door closed behind her, Mike finally let his body relax. His friends were currently snickering in delight and Mike looked greatly unimpressed.

"Laugh it up jerks," his demeanour becoming significantly softer when he saw the chestnut coloured eye poking through the blanket, followed by the button nose and the soft curve of her lip. Mike realised he probably could do with the detention in only a few hours

if it meant he'd cool it over all the little things that caught his attention about the party's fifth member.

"You can come out now Eleven," he kindly offered, and found her hand pushing back the blanket like a curtain.

Mike slipped out the smuggled fifth cup and a juice box for her. "Mom's right for bringing down the water. We shouldn't load you up on sugar, it's probably not good for you so soon back."

Eleven had crawled out of the fort like a languid cat when Mike started to pour himself some water, stabbing the juice box straw through the hole and handing it over. "It doesn't fizz."

The girl looked mighty appreciative of this, noting the cold and sweet fruity taste that came but was a smooth blend without the feeling that her mouth was under attack.

"Thank you," Eleven said clunkily. Etiquette was a little harder for her, but she knew it needed to be applied in someone else's home when they were offering you food. She was content to be quiet when the boys talked among themselves - mostly arguing over all the food she had to try first, allowing her some time to just gather herself properly after just under a day back.

They were all so generous with her, offering their effort and time to teach her the things that the Lab wouldn't in fear that she might grow a sense of independence from it. Mike offered his home here and she suspected he would always do so, regardless of whether his mother knew or not. The only thing she ever had that was her own home, that she made wholly hers, was a dilapidated Upside Down version of the current basement she sat in now. It was colder there, but she tried to make something with it. But that was gone now and for the better. But with all this uncertainty as to where she stood in this world, dead or alive, Eleven couldn't help but wonder if she would ever be in the position to give back to her friends the same way they had for her?

That sweet kiss upon Mike's head struck Eleven in a way that she had felt as though a keen part of her was missing, an integral part of her that always felt helpless, lost and unloved. A love only a mother or a

father could provide with familial warmth, protection and upbringing.

She had supposed that she'd had a mother and a father once when Mike asked her all those years ago. That for her to exist, a combination of the two must have taken place. But that's all they were, the explanation for her creation but not the reason for her living happy. They weren't Karen Wheeler, a woman who kissed her son even when his mortification didn't endear him to her at that moment. They weren't Joyce Byers, who held her warmly and bent the world to her whim whether it wanted it or not in order to her find her little boy in a parallel universe, one in which Eleven's remorseful thoughts cackled at her in reminder that it was she who opened the gate in the first place.

Even with the dubiousness that came with Joyce's character currently, Eleven felt that Joyce wouldn't blame her for opening the gate. She'd not done it on purpose after all, and she was just a child - a child treated like a circus animal.

But from Eleven's understanding of father figures, she didn't have many outstanding examples to gage from when hearing how Mike spoke about his dad like it was almost a joke and how Will didn't say his dad's name without it sounding like a poison he needed to spit out in order to save himself from becoming the same.

No, mothers did most of the work from what Eleven witnessed.

She had a Mike, she had a kindred spirit in Will, she was surer now that she had a Lucas, and she was even blessed with a Dustin, despite some of the surprising things that came out of his mouth, and Eleven was even hopeful that having a friend who was a girl was on the cards soon.

Now all she wanted was a home and a mother, two things she felt like would be very hard to come by while on the run from some government faction that only wanted to use her until her battery ran out. It was all she could wish for.

"Do you want to take the couch tonight El? I think you might have outgrown the actual blanket fort," Mike said sheepishly.

Eleven was taken straight out of her thoughts but was glad of the distraction when it came from such a pleasant human being with a pretty face.

"Um, yes, I'd like that."

The night goes on comfortably and Eleven is taken through another volume worth of knowledge, some of it using big and very difficult science words and others that simply went into the history of movies as an institution of entertainment and how comic books are just more fun versions of traditional fiction books.

Will helps take her makeup off and she brushes through her hair before it's put into a bun to keep it from getting tangled.

They plan what they're going to do while Mike is serving detention, to which he pouts about, trying to find ways to weave in education about the Western world while they're potentially helping a fugitive escape the US government.

Eleven felt truly at peace with the fact that this *might* actually work when her eyes started to drift off. It's not so much later that the warmth of a blanket cocoons her, sending her into a much deeper sleep.

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The rickety elevator opened on the fourth level when Jonathan walked out. Late night developing for yuppie assholes who needed things open every hour of the day for their convenience alone had given Jonathan some sort of a job to do outside of his college schedule. He only really needed the money to pay rent, food and bills, but he ended up doing double shifts so he could at least save some money.

Jonathan didn't have many new friends in New York anyway - with the exception of a couple of people in his classes who invited him to parties, but it wasn't often his scene. So he was content with the life he had. Not thrilled, but content.

While he cracked his back, caused from hunching over in the developing room, with an audible noise of pure agreement from the

feeling it brought him, he hiked his bag further up on his shoulder and shook his long hair out of his face. He stopped in his tracks when he saw a small young brunette sitting outside his front door with a duffle bag next to her, head down in her knees, deep in thought or reserving any energy she may have had.

"Nancy?"

She looked up at Jonathan, her eyes wide. Her deepest fears were only slightly assuaged when she saw him, knowing she wasn't alone. It was her jittery display and her wild eyes that clued Jonathan in to think she'd had a bad New York experience. He bends down to her level.

"Jesus Nancy, are you okay?"

"Can we talk inside?" her voice strangely deep and demanding despite her agitated body, eyes boring sensationally into his own.

Jonathan nods quickly, helping her up and unlocking his apartment door.

He haphazardly drops his bag to the floor after turning the lights on and finding his way into the kitchen, Nancy not far behind.

"Do you want a glass of water or a coffee?" he offered.

"A stiff drink would be good actually," Nancy mentioned with her arms crossed over her body.

"That bad, huh?" Jonathan taking in her still paranoid disposition, although seeing she had mildly come down from a potential anxiety attack when in his presence and behind a locked door.

"Think the worst case scenario." Jonathan paused after retrieving a glass, slowly and meaningfully looking at Nancy. "Has something happened back home?"

"I can't know for sure yet, and depending on which way you answer, I'll have either been acting melodramatic or my worst fears have been realised," Nancy said with a deep breath, as Jonathan found the bottle of whiskey he only had on certain occasions like this.

"Do you have any - I don't know - distant relatives from Iceland?" Nancy started again. Jonathan frowned as he poured the drink for her.

"Pretty sure I don't, why?"

Nancy picked up the drink and took a swig, in some clear need of it as her mind swirled with endless possibilities of what was occurring back in Hawkins without her there. She took a fond look of the drink before setting it down on his kitchen counter.

"Apparently Will's got a cousin who's visiting from Iceland in Hawkins, figured you being his brother and all you'd know something about that. But it's pretty clear now that story is a lie and something else is going on."

Jonathan looks wildly confused and mildly amused. "Yeah, I'm not really following Nance."

"Her name is El, Jonathan," Nancy said as she watched him carefully.

His mind is racking around for some recollection of this name when it lands on a little girl's shaved head three years prior.

"Well, fuck," Jonathan said as he started pulling out a second glass.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you - one of us needs to be sober," Nancy admitted.

Jonathan looked at her strangely, "Why would one of us need to be sober...Nancy, we can't drive back to Indiana tonight. I'm fucking wrecked from work and you're clearly in no right mind to be driving off on a - a -"

"This isn't a whim. Steve called me. Mike was pretty smitten with the girl he saw him with, and he was extremely protective her. The whole group seemed to be actually."

"How about I call my Mom first-"

"No!" Nancy shut down the option, "There is a chance your mom is in on this and can't call you. The lines were tapped last time,

remember? Steve shouldn't have even called me! Thank god he didn't say anything that was too easy to pick up on - but if we don't leave now -"

Jonathan interrupted her immediately. "We're not going tonight Nancy."

Nancy looked severely disappointed, "Then I'll go without you."

"I'm not saying we're not going," Jonathan appealed to her sense of logic which could sometimes run amok when it came to this old trauma with a deep sigh located in his chest. "I'm saying we're not going tonight."

Nancy picked up her drink and then asked, "So then what's the plan?"

Jonathan poured himself a drink, knowing it would help with getting him to sleep, which he predicted he would have little. He took a hearty drink before placing it back down on the counter, contemplating what to do next with this new information.

"5 am, we leave," he started. "Beat the traffic out of New York. It's clear you've packed already, I need to do that too. I've got some twinkies and granola bars for travel, we can stop at a gas station on the way for proper supplies. We'll do shifts."

Nancy was relieved to hear that. Her nerves had relaxed somewhat. Her only hope was that Mike and whoever else was involved would hold out until they got back to Hawkins.

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Mike awoke with a gasping breath.

He was alone in the basement, no sign of his friends.

He felt the immediate anxiety spike in his heart, jumpstarting him out of his sleeping bag. He ran up the stairs to see his Mom cooking and Holly colouring in a book on the counter.

"Mike, sweetie, what were you doing down in the basement? You have a bedroom of your own last I recalled," his mom said with some concern. Holly giggled at her place on the counter.

He ignored that weird comment. "Where did the guys go?"

"Honey I think you were having a dream," his Mom intimated amused, "You're sleepover isn't until tonight."

"No - no, that's not right. I was - I swear I was just having a sleepover last night, everyone was there, Dustin, Will, Lucas and Eleven."

He clapped his hands over his mouth when he said the last name, and his mom looked around with a hand on her hip.

"Michael, that little Russian girl is gone, she couldn't have possibly been here," his mother said callously.

Mike was taken back by his mother's attitude and riled up to argue.

"She was! She came back from the Upside Down. Will got her back and we took her to the mall and I finally managed to pay off the bracelet I bought for her and I was going to give it to her for Christmas -"

"Michael! The Russian girl is dead, why are you spending money on someone who is deceased?" his mother looked highly horrified. She moved away from her cooking and picked up the phone, dialling a number very quickly.

It picked up after a solitary ring.

"Yes, this is Karen Wheeler. My son has lost his mind."

"What?!" Mike yelled, "I haven't gone insane, this is a crock of shit!"

"Mikey's brain went down the drain," his little sister began to sing, "Because a girl couldn't hold her word."

The back door burst in like an explosion when several men in hazmat suits started filling in, hundreds of them surrounding their kitchen and waiting for Mike to attack eagerly. The leader sauntered up to his mother taking her in his arms and a dip before taking off his helmet with one hand.

"You're a sick lad Michael Wheeler. We're going to make you right as



rain."

"David Bowie?" Mike asked in disbelief.

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Mike choked on air when he jolted awake. The frantic stream of thoughts left over from what he now realised was a bizarre dream most likely rooted in his greatest fears, led him to sit up and look through the darkened basement.

There was a quiet hum from Dustin's light snoring, Lucas tightly tucked in his sleeping bag and Will sleeping on his front, head buried in his pillow. Mike sighed, a wave of the cool that his heart desperately needed after that surreal trip.

"Mike?" a quiet whisper from the couch alerted him.

And with that, all his worries from that specific moment dispersed. Eleven was watching him from her position as she said, "Are you okay?"

Mike rubbed his eyes and replied. "Yeah, just had a really weird dream. Why are you awake?"

"I had a nightmare. I thought I wasn't really here."

Mike checked the time on his watch to see it was 3 am. They really ought to be getting back to sleep, but Mike could tell by the look on Eleven's face that that wouldn't be possible unless she had some encouragement.

Mike gestured with his hand to the couch. Eleven sat up and made room for him.

"It'll be easier to hear you without waking up the guys," Mike explained as he sat next to her. The couch was warm, her natural body heat having made it so. "Do you want to talk about it?"

To his surprise, Eleven shook her head. "Sometimes I would dream that I came back and then I would wake up back in there...this is easier."

Mike nodded solemnly. It would've been harder when her reality was, in fact, the nightmare.

"Do you want to talk about yours?"

Mike shrugged uncertainly, "It's pretty much along the same lines as yours. You never came back in my dream. And my mom had me taken away while my little sister sang a really mean song. But then Bowie was the guy taking me away. So I realised then that maybe I was dreaming."

"Who is Bowie?" Eleven asked with her eyes squinted at the strange name.

Mike looked around the basement and his eyes just barely made out the poster on the wall that had been put up about a year ago when he got it for free at the arcade. "That man right there. He's a rockstar."

Eleven smiled when she looked at the poster, barely able to make it out in the dark.

"I have a feeling that he turned up in my dream because of the poster," Mike remarked thoughtfully, "Kind of saved me from spiralling deeper into that awful dream so I should probably thank him."

Mike felt El taking his hand and she flipped it carefully to look at the knuckles, bandaged and bruised. She turned, facing him as she crossed her legs on the couch.

"Mouthbreather," El stated with a recollection.

"I was acting like a mouthbreather when that happened," Mike said sheepishly. "Fell off my bike."

It was a bad lie.

Eleven's eyes penetrated his through the dark and said, "Friends don't lie, Mike."

Mike's heart plunged into his stomach with those words uttered in the darkness. He sighed in some defeat. He turned on his spot and

crossed his legs, so they were facing each other, knees practically touching it almost made Mike's heart soar back up from his stomach with a jumpstart.

"I guess you were also there in the parking lot when Troy said what he did..." Mike remembered quietly, looking down at their joined hands. "It was yesterday...technically two days ago to be more exact. He was trying to intimidate Will, trying to scare him up into a fight, but Will was better than that. Cassidy - she actually managed to defuse the situation and we all walked away but he was mouthing off to make himself look big in the cafeteria...at one point he mentioned...he mentioned you."

Mike looked at her face, wondering what her reaction would be. Was she going to be disappointed him? She'd been surrounded by enough violence in her life. It surely wouldn't be good that he showed some sort of a streak. But she was simply listening, taking in everything he had to say. It somehow made it harder for him to speak, because he couldn't see what she felt.

"What did he say about me?" El asked slowly.

Mike swallowed and said somewhat bitterly, "At least that crazy tramp bitch of yours stayed in the ground'."

Eleven frowned. She knew 'bitch' was mean aside from its actual definition, and she certainly knew 'crazy' was considered insulting too, but 'tramp' was something she didn't come across too often. "What does 'tramp' mean?"

Mike seemed surprised by the question, before stuttering for a moment, "Um...it's a mean word for a homeless person or a beggar."

"Oh...well he's not wrong about that. I am homeless," Eleven said it like a fact. Mike seemed very adamant against such a suggestion.

"You might not have a permanent place to live, but you will always have shelter with us El," Mike said fiercely. He needed her to understand that.

She nodded with a small understanding smile. "So you hurt him

because he said that?"

Mike flinched at hearing it in that context. "I, I wasn't thinking. Another part of me just switched on and I went bananas on the guy."

"You stick up for your friends," Eleven noted, "You pushed him when he said mean things about Will when everyone thought he was dead."

"And I would've been beaten up then too if you hadn't come to the rescue," Mike pointed out.

"You must've been very angry if you beat him up instead," Eleven countered.

Mike nodded in some disappointment, "Yeah. I did a fair amount of damage if you saw his face."

"And because he pointed out that I might also be dead too," Eleven said in some thought, watching Mike react to hearing her say this in some intrigue. His whole body shrunk and all he could do was nod in response.

She held his hand closer in some inspection, careful not to touch where it was sensitive as she flexes his long, thin fingers, roughened from boyhood.

Her whole body perked up and she looked into Mike's face. "Wait here, I have something."

Mike watched her with a furrow in his brow, confused as she pulls away and uncrossed her legs, quietly tiptoeing toward where her bag was stashed, having to carefully make her way over Will's sleeping form and rifling through her Upside Down bag.

Eleven had a small pile, nicely folded which meant Will had been in there before she could tell him off, but she acquiesced for this moment. El had her hands underneath the dress, socks and Mike's old flannel shirt, placing the very worn out shoes on top.

She turned around and tiptoed through the caverns of sleeping teenage boys and discarded candy wrappers and empty cans of coke and plopped back on the couch with a resounding groan noise -

which didn't manage to wake up their fellow friends.

She laid out the dress in the small between them and the flannel, the socks one by one and the shoes sitting on top.

Mike knew Lucas would have a stroke when he saw the contaminated clothes so close to their vicinity but Mike didn't care at that moment. His fingers traced the dress and found some of the tears, from a long time of wear, particularly where it counted in her chest. Mike didn't think that constriction would've been comfortable in the least. The shoes were outright filthy and the socks were dirtied right where they weren't covered by the shoe's defences to muck. The flannel by far had been in the best condition, but he supposed that once she got a proper jacket to wear from Hopper's supplies, it was more of a secondary layer and not her main defence from the colder elements of the Upside Down.

"You kept these...even when you got new clothes?" his voice soft and riddled with emotion.

She nodded with a small frown, like doing anything else with them would be a capital offence. "I kept them so I could give them back to you one day. I'm sorry that they're in such bad condition."

Mike laughed quietly and shook his head, almost careful to not cry at the very sight of these clothes as the girl sat before him. His memories flooded with the comfort of a time long gone by, where he was twelve and he thought that a bunch of kids could do absolutely anything when they put their mind to it, and that being the literal case for the strange girl he'd found in Mirkwood.

He got up and went to find the place where he had hidden the two items when it was being pushed onto a donation pile a couple of years before. The navy sweater and grey sweatpants were still soft from the last time they were washed and put away, and he hopped over Lucas to get back to the couch to show Eleven.

She picked up the sweater and took a big sniff, recalling the fresh laundry scent and the softness under her fingertips. They were the first thing she wore after being drenched in the rainfall, running from Benny's shooting and Papa's men.

"I-I kept them just in case you ever came back and needed some emergency clothes. Not that you need them now, you've grown and we went shopping..."

But El is still enamoured with her own thoughts to concentrate on Mike's effected rambling.

"It's stupid, I know," Mike said finally.

Eleven looked up at him and she slowly shook her head. "No it's not, Mike."

Mike smiled shyly at hearing this. He knows he's going through the motions, knows that it's still overwhelming and unsafe, but he has a moment with just her that isn't covered in tears and his heartbeat won't hammer out of his chest comically, but her effect is still there, seeping through him and calming him now that he felt his wounds healing again.

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Funny what a strange sense of peace will do to people, only to be left open and vulnerable for the greater forces to start their little game.

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*Author's Note:*

*I don't think a 5,000-word limit will ever cut it since I basically doubled that.*

*Anyway, I'm nearly at the halfway point which is always an achievement in this monster of a fic that I've created for myself.*

*The next chapter will have a lot more action which, reading a Stranger Things fanfic, you'd hope for, right?*

*It's going to be bumpy from here on out folks.*

*If you'd like to leave me a comment, please do - they are very much appreciated!*

*Fadinggx*

## 12. World Shut Your Mouth

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### Chapter Twelve

#### World Shut Your Mouth

The sun filtered through the tiny window of the Wheeler basement and onto Will's sleeping face. When he turned in his sleep, his eyelids burned red at the sight.

"Ugh," he groaned tiredly.

His body stretched as he pivoted around in his sleeping bag, rubbing at his eyes and giving a big yawn before he had a look around the basement.

Mike's alarm hadn't gone off yet, but Will had slept surprisingly well all conditions considered and so didn't immediately try and force himself into a short snooze period before it would. Lucas and Dustin were still in a deep sleep, and when he saw Mike's sleeping bag empty, he sat up a little to check the time on his watch.

It blared in green numbers: 6:48 am.

Will took another look around to see the couch looked a lot bunchier than its usual slumpy state. His eyes travelled to the sock covered foot poking out the end.

Will would have found this moment worthy of remembering for later on to tease his friend - but his heart stopped in his chest when he saw a little messy blonde head curiously staring down at the couch on the other. Holly's head was tilted and she made a little hemming and hawing noise like it was better to express how she was thinking.

"Fuck!" Will whispered.

He stood up, nearly tripping on Dustin as he made his way over, his desperation clouding any chance of coming up with a viable solution to this potential disaster in the making, and crashed beside Holly, his



knees screaming at him in the process.

"Who's she?" Holly asked, her little high pitched voice attempting to whisper.

"Um," Will said as his eyes landed on the two - who's foreheads were together, having fallen asleep talking, with their hands just barely out of each other's grasp. The first word that came to mind was 'adorable' but shortly after it was 'panic'. "I think we should ask Mike."

Will carefully lifted his arm over Eleven's sleeping form and nudged Mike roughly until he woke.

"Go away," came his sleepy monotone voice.

"Mike, wake up," Will said surprisingly stern.

Mike's eyes bolted open and he looked at Will as he said blearily, "This isn't what it looks like."

"Sure, we've got bigger problems," Will said with a sense of pure urgency behind.

"Shit, shit, did I miss my alarm?" Mike tried carefully moving so as to not wake Eleven.

"No. It's worse," said Will painfully, as his mop of hair and his head gestured sharply to where Mike couldn't see above him.

Mike looked to see his little sister, wearing a long sleeve lavender nightgown, staring down at him with an innocent curiosity in her demeanour. His mouth fell open at the sight of her as she now looked between him and his couch buddy.

"Hello Holly," Mike's voice croaked.

"Morning Mike. Who's she?" her little index finger pointed at Eleven.

Mike swallowed thoroughly. "A very special friend...so special that she's a secret."

Will decided to gently wake Eleven for her sake and she mumbled

and moaned, but eventually came to, and turned to Will.

"We've got ourselves in a pickle, Eggo," Will informed her.

"Is her name Eggo?" the little high pitched voice started up again.  
"Not a good name. But she has really nice hair."

El's eyes widened with some horror as she knew that wasn't a familiar *trusted* voice to be in her presence. She turned around to see Mike's younger sister staring at her inquisitively. She didn't think it very appropriate being in such close vicinity to her brother, having slept next to him on his basement couch, but she supposed it would be wrong to scream at her or yell at her to mind her own business.

"No, her name isn't Eggo," Mike corrected her, "Her name is El."

"El. That's better," Holly spoke her truth.

"Yeah, people don't tend to name their kids after artificial waffles," Mike responded.

"They don't usually name them after numbers either," Will quipped, only to get some side eye from Mike.

"What's your name?" El asked, ignoring both boys. She could tell that they were panicking. She needed to distract this little girl somehow, knowing they could come up with a plan.

Holly straightened up immediately, not used to being on display often, but happy to put on the show since she wasn't so shy anymore. "My name is Holly Madison Wheeler."

"How old are you?" Eleven quickly shot off.

"I'm six years old."

"You're nine years younger than me," El said as a matter of fact.

"The same as Mike," Holly pointed out.

"Yes. You have a very pretty name, Holly," El complimented.

"Thanks...why are you special?"

This stumped El for a moment, and the two boys were trying to figure out what to do when she remembered part of Operation Sneak Eggos Past Concessions.

"Dustin," she called quietly.

When that didn't work, she urged Will to wake him, who despite the confusion and uncertainty to her plan, followed along anyway. He and Mike had failed to come up with anything on the spot so soon after being woken.

Dustin fought at thin air when Will woke him up and sat up in some fear.

"What the hell Will?" Dustin's morning voice groaned.

"We have a problem and El thinks you should be involved...somehow. Just get up," Will ordered hurriedly.

Dustin saw around Will and let out an almost wookie style moan at the scene before.

"Please tell me I'm *imagining* Holly in front of El, Will."

"You're not. El, what's the plan here?" Will asked her desperately.

"Dustin the Magnificent. He does magic tricks. So can I," El explained slowly to the group, including Holly.

"Right," Mike picks up, "El is so special...she can do magic."

"But people want my magic," El said quietly, leaning her head on the arm of the couch to look at her more, "And a lot of those people are bad."

"Villains," Holly softly suggested.

"Exactly Holly. They're villains, they're very bad people. El doesn't want to be bad. So you have to keep it a secret. Otherwise...otherwise she might disappear," Mike finishes very quietly. "We don't want her

to disappear, you understand?"

There's a breath of a moment that the four who are awake hitch in all the oxygen into their bodies, anticipating for the worst case scenario. Mike is waiting on her howl her lungs out, Will is waiting for her to cry, merely at the word 'villain', Dustin decides it's not worth watching their downfall before their eyes and El is almost waiting for her to keel over from the current indecision she's dealing with.

One thing seems to keep her occupied.

"What magic can you do?"

"Holly," Mike warned his little sister.

"It's okay Mike," Eleven insisted. She smiles kindly at Holly and sits up. "I'll show you what I can do. But you have to swear you won't ever tell anyone else about me."

There's a hesitation in her eyes, but the prospect of magic, real magic in front of her very eyes is too tempting to pass up. Holly nodded at the deal, but Eleven didn't think that was secure enough.

She spat on her hand and held it out to the little girl who looked entirely too grossed out to reciprocate. Will looked marvelled that Eleven knew about spit swears and Mike covered his amused smile, before suggesting an alternative.

"When girls shake on something, they tend to avoid the spit swear," Mike disclosed, offering a demonstration of the more common oath between children that didn't deride from bodily fluids.

"Do you, Holly Madison Wheeler, promise to never reveal El's secret or her existence in the world?" Mike proposed with a very serious tone. His sister appreciated not being spoken down to, so she held firm in her posture before holding out a pinky finger.

"I promise," the six-year-old declared with full sincerity.

Eleven wrapped her pinky with the much smaller one and the two linked briefly, while El wiped her other hand on her leg.

When they relinquished the oath, Holly instantly wanted to see the magic Eleven claimed to have.

Eleven didn't move a muscle, but she looked a little more analytically at Holly's shape and form. Mere moments passed before Holly felt her feet leaving the ground and gravity no longer being an element that she was stuck with. She rose nearly to the ceiling until she gently floated back down in the same spot, landing on her feet.

Her eyes were saucers as she stared at Eleven, a delightful smile reaching the corners of her mouth and a very awake sparkle in her eye.

"Can you do that again?" she asked immediately.

"Holly!" Mike admonished his little sister. "You can't ask that of her. She'll become weak and tired."

El barely flinched at the suggestion however and had her up in the air once more and even threw in a couple of turns and flips, which threw Holly into a fit of pure glee.

She was plopped down carefully on Mike's empty sleeping bag. El had a feeling that the ferociousness of the experience could make the little girl ill and she wasn't keen on being a potential victim of where she could aim her sick.

Her eyes were manic with pure joy now and it was obvious that her mind and imagination were both fulfilled with Eleven's display of 'magic'.

"Holly - you need to keep this a secret," Mike reiterated sternly.

She simply nodded, her face bright and full of energy but in too much shock to speak.

"Go upstairs for breakfast. I'll meet you in a minute, okay?" Mike urged her.

She nodded again and then ran up the stairs and into the kitchen.

Dustin, from his lying position, groaned again. "I hope your *six-year-*

old sister is good for a *pinky swear* Mike!"

"She won't say anything now that she's literally had her pixie dust moment," Mike grumbled, but in truth, even he couldn't be sure that that would be enough, "Besides, you didn't have a problem with Cassidy getting close and personal with El."

"Well *Cassidy* doesn't actually *know* about El's abilities and that she's technically a *fugitive*," Dustin responded testily.

Will pulled out his notebook from his backpack and started writing, ignoring the bickering between his two friends, "We're going to have to start thinking of back-up plans now that Holly is most certainly in on the secret."

"This is getting too big. We have to cut it down to absolutely nobody else from now on," said Dustin seriously.

"It doesn't seem *too* dangerous yet," Mike said honestly.

"Yeah and we thought Will going missing after one day was fine too," Dustin argued, "Then we find a psychokinetic girl, and that seems odd, but it's nothing we can't handle. Then it turns out Will is dead - but really it's a stuffed body and he's stuck in another dimension that's evil - are you getting the picture, Mike?"

"I got it," Mike said impatiently, "Don't assume everything is okay, even for a minute."

"Sounds like something Hopper would say," Will said, mostly to himself than anyone else.

"That's because it probably is something he said," Mike proclaimed, as he started getting up from the couch, moving around El.

He stretched his limbs and cracked his neck, noticing the looks he was getting from Dustin and Will. They were both worried, but they were both still present enough in the moment to notice that Mike had slept on the couch with Eleven.

His cheeks flared up like a bad reaction and he turned away from them. Eleven was yawning wide and stretching her arms before she

noticed him looking at her.

She wasn't as peaky as she looked the day before, and he supposed that had something to do with the warm temperature she was surrounded by, her clean environment, and the hair cut.

Her cheeks were still worryingly hollow but he hoped that from her new eating habits that it would make up for the weight she lost. Lucas suggested supplements as an option too - something Mike thought would be worth looking into when the bigger picture could mean something more detrimental to her mortality.

But Mike believed that for the present moment, Eleven was actually on a good track.

He kneeled before her, in some effort to make their conversation a little more personal.

"I'm going upstairs, and I might not come back down if it means exposing you. I'm going to be out of school at 12:00 pm. That's when there's a 1, a 2 and then there are two number-"

"I know how to tell the time Mike," she interrupted him, with an amused smile.

"Oh really? Uh, okay, so yeah, I'll be finished at noon. The guys will be with you the whole time. I'll see you later, I promise."

Eleven's poise suggested that she knew he would, even if there were obstacles in the way.

"Thank you, Mike."

---

Mike had shovelled down breakfast like a starving animal, before getting showered and dressed. When he came back down, his hair still a little damp, three of his friends sat at the table.

"We can do the dishes, Mrs Wheeler. You always cook for us and we'd like to clean up after you made us another delicious meal," Lucas spoke, an extra heaping of politeness to his tone.

His mom's hand hit her heart and she smiled, "If you insist Lucas."

To Mike's surprise, his dad was assigned drop off detail, which was probably for the best since the man could hardly communicate with his friends as his mom did.

And boy was that drive awkward.

Mostly because he wasn't expecting his dad to give him some sort of a pep talk in the way in.

Then again, it was probably his mom who put him up to it.

Just as the school was coming into view, his dad coughed, clearing his throat before patting Mike on the shoulder. "I know you're not a bad kid Mike. But I hope this is the last time I drop you off here for this reason."

Mike wondered if it was because he was cutting into his dad's early morning Saturday snooze in the Laz-E-Boy, but decided not to vocalise that thought.

Instead, Mike nodded.

His exit from the car was swift.

As his dad drives away, Mike hikes his backpack up on his shoulder and brushes his hand through his hair. He releases a fresh yawn, his energy taken from the emotional toll that was being away from his friends in this very unstable time and walks toward the school doors.

He nearly trips on his shoelace and throws his head back with an annoyed groan. Bending down on one knee, he ties it up. When he gets back up, he feels the back of his neck twinge with fear, as his eye takes in a car parked further down in the parking lot, looking empty. His instincts are screaming at him but his logic and memories are stomping them down.

The car looks like trash, and the cars that Brenner's men used were predominantly Hawkins Power & Light vans and pretty sharp and clean looking vehicles, nothing of this car's condition, which had discolouration and a little bit of rust around the edges.



Mike just had to assume that it was his teacher's car...even though they had a separate parking lot behind the gym.

"You're just paranoid," he said to himself in a whisper.

He pushed the doors to the school open and quickly makes his way to the library where the Saturday detention is served.

When he goes through the swinging door to his library and finds the tables, he discovers to some of his concern, that he is the only one there.

With the exception of the teacher, of course, who is Mr Howard, a Geography teacher who rarely incited any inspiration in his classes, but Mike didn't necessarily care much for Geography so it worked out for him. Mr Howard was not pleased to see him at all.

"Michael Wheeler," he announces slowly. "You're early."

Mike doesn't respond, knowing that there's a chance any response he gives will be taken as being a smartass and he wasn't trying to land himself back in detention next week during this crucial time. He takes a seat at the first table, and fishes out the necessities for the day, his lunch and pencil case.

The lined loose leaf papers are slapped on the table before him. Mike can tell his supervising teacher is undergoing some obvious tension but for the life of him, he can't figure out what his damage is.

"Let's get a couple of things out of the way Mr Wheeler. You aren't to talk to...well I guess that rule doesn't matter..." he went off track, unused to the single student detention, "Okay. Here's the deal. You write a 750-word essay on why violence isn't the answer before noon, you're out and in the clear and so am I for that fact."

Mike's brow furrowed at hearing this very resigned ending to be given some actual answers to his confusion for once.

Mr Howard rolled his eyes and said, "I was the teacher supervising the cafeteria on Thursday."

"Oh," Mike gave a long drawn out understanding. Mr Howard was

probably guilted into this because he failed to actually supervise. From the itchy energy he gave off, Mike suspected it was a cigarette break. "So you're doing your time to, huh?"

"Just about right Mr Wheeler," but his confirmation wasn't pleasant. "So, you do what you have to do, and I'll make sure you don't have to come back here unless what happened on Thursday is repeated of course."

"I don't think they'd let me back in the school if I did *that* again sir," Mike said uneasily.

"Good, so you know what's on the line," Mr Howard said smoothly, before checking his watch and wiggling his brows for a moment.

"I'd get started if I were you, Wheeler. Most kids in these detentions need the full four hours."

Mike held back the glare that he felt brewing, and just looked straight at the paper, knowing that his presence here didn't equate to his level of intelligence.

---

Eleven was sitting in the back of Lucas' car with Will. They had just successfully smuggled her past the Wheeler family members and they were waiting for Lucas and Dustin to come along sometime soon. Will had started Lucas' car to get the engine running. Hawkins was a bit bitter in cold weather this November morning and he figured he could get the recent mixtape playing, and give Eleven some of his knowledge in music.

She really gelled with the punk rock genre, which made a lot of sense to Will as she carried quite the tone and background for it, a lot of emotion that was probably anger too. Eleven could probably pull off a very Joan Jett vibe given the right materials, but she looked pretty happy in her more feminine clothing.

"I can get Jonathan to make you a special mixtape, more to your tastes. He's a bit of a music snob, but he often gets it right when he knows someone well enough," Will offered her. She smiled at the idea, although she hadn't understood the whole concept yet. Will

knew Jonathan was better when it came to explaining music anyway.

It was then that a busted up white van started pulling up to the end of the cul de sac, opposite the Wheeler home. It was almost the same model as Hawkins Power & Light, which immediately spiked Eleven's interest.

Will too was worried but for different reasons. "What's wrong Eleven?"

"That van - Papa's van," Eleven said, the shaking of her voice enough to spin the tension in the car.

Will took one glance at it, and as his heartbeat picked up, and so did his unfortunate bodily reactions.

The feeling of the crawling menaces inside his body was tenfold as he gave great hacking coughs, covering his mouth in fear of any leftover breakfast coming up with it, but was almost grateful that it was just a slug. It was not as long as the one he'd coughed up before he brought back El from the Upside Down, however, it was thick and most definitely a choking hazard if he'd ever felt one before, sucking in as much breath that he practically gasped and wheezed.

Will could deal with it the same way as he dealt with the others - but he would likely make this one feel the torture he had just endured.

He sat in the car still but as he looked up, he was no longer surrounded by light and people, just the darkness, mustiness and overall toxicity of the Upside Down. It was even colder than the Indiana winter, and the particles covered the outside world and stuck to the windows. But he could hear them...

So many of them.

One by one, shadows appeared through the windows closer to the car, the roaring noises, the animalistic sniffing out of prey.

Will held his arms across his body and started to shake, as the car was slowly being surrounded by the creatures that had raided his nightmares since he was twelve years old.

Something jumped up onto the bonnet and the car creaked under its weight, the shadow cascading over the windscreen.

He felt the shaking here and a bang there as the car was being rattled about, bashed by the creatures trying to devour fresh prey. They'd never been this close to him before, they were always far off somewhere.

*Will.*

Will held himself tighter. The glass was beginning to crack under a couple of smashes from the creature's vast size and power.

*Will!*

Too afraid to look, Will shook his head in reply and screamed, "Go away!"

"Will?" Eleven asked frighteningly quiet.

Will felt as though all the oxygen from his lungs had been sucked out and he struggled for breath. He looked toward the voice, remembering Eleven's presence and breathed heavily and quickly. He felt the squirming in his lap, and as Eleven's eyes were stuck on it, he started shoving the small invasive creature into his jacket pocket, though it was a tight fit.

To her amazement, he grabbed her roughly and hugged her close. He was still shaking, almost to the point of sending him through another nauseating vomit, but he was holding on to the fact that he was present and she was there.

"You got me out...I've always been stuck for longer than that. You got me out."

He felt her hand stroking him gently, soothing his fears away and his breathing slowed down after some come down from his frightening trip back, so soon after the last time.

"You're sick," Eleven told him quietly.

"You - you can't tell anyone Eleven."

Eleven was audibly confused, and seemed to pull away to better describe this, "Why...why don't you?"

Will fell back into his seat and rubbed his head over his temples, feeling the raw sensation of travelling through dimensions briefly impact his head.

"I've been treated like a fragile object for a long time now. And when you're handled that way, you try to make things easier for the people around you, because you don't want to make their life any harder than it's been...do you know what I mean?"

El watched him sceptically but soon after nodded. "I stayed in the Upside Down."

Will sighed as he was about to tell her that was different because she needed to come back and be with the people who cared about her in a healthier environment where she was safe.

But in truth, it wasn't. He swallowed, having stopped himself from giving that explanation. Because he would be a hypocrite if he had.

Eleven took his hand in hers and held it tightly. "They need you too, Will."

Will looked at her and remembered what he'd said to her not so long ago when it was just the two of them. And here she was throwing it back in his face, rightfully so.

Eleven took her hand away and poked at his jacket pocket.

"What will happen to it?"

Will explained that he had a strong method that got rid of them. "They don't do well with fire and at this stage, they're too weak to get out of a can, so I seal them up and light them up."

"When will you do that?" Eleven asked as she referenced the two boys still in the house with her finger.

Will groaned in despair. "Shit, shit!"

There wasn't going to be a way to do this without someone figuring it out. Will knew that with the current situation, the boys would barely be separated if they were sticking to the rules of always staying together, with strength in numbers. Will was almost wishing he'd had the Saturday detention now.

Eleven poked his pocket again and said earnestly, "Let me."

His eyes looked into hers for a moment, a recollection of what she knew and what she could do. He fished into his pocket and pulled out the massive slug, the slick wetness of it making Eleven shudder somewhat. Will was too used to it by now for it to have any effect on him, but he could still see how she could be disgusted.

She plucked it from his hold and barely flicked her head to one side a second later, her hatred fueling this quick kill, as it fell limp in her hand, totally lifeless. Will's mouth hung open slightly. He'd seen Eleven do amazing things, lift Holly through the air and fell hundred-year-old trees. But the instant kill of a creature with barely a touch of her hand had him stumped beyond belief.

Eleven barely shrugged it off when she handed it back to him. "It won't get bigger now. We'll burn it later."

Will nodded, his face still in some awe when she tilted her head and one of her brows lifted.

She then showed him where she stood with her hand on top and pointed at the dead slug and moved her hand at the lowest point, Will picturing a hierarchy pyramid that she had developed in her mind when dealing with the creatures of the Upside Down. This thing in his hand was just an average Tuesday for her.

"Thanks, El," Will said genuinely grateful.

He checked out the window to see that their fears were unfounded when the familiar face of Jarrod, one of the local plumbers pulled out his toolbox and went down to the house across from the Wheeler's.

She patted his arm gently and said, "Please tell them soon. Please."

Will flinched at the thought but didn't disagree.

---

Mike had sat in the same spot for around an hour and a half, setting the time at 9:45 am. He'd written and rewritten the opening statement and attempted to add more flourish to up the word count to save him some time. He'd stop along the way occasionally to check his word count before moving on. Just as he was about to move through his second argument rewrite, Mr Howard stood up straight from his chair.

"I'm going out for a minute. You don't move from that space, you hear me?" Mr Howard warned clearly.

"Yes, Mr Howard," Michael answered simply.

The teacher swiftly left like a kid needing to go to the bathroom but knew his itch came from the lack of the pay off of a cigarette.

He shook his head, knowing the proposed one minute would turn into ten or fifteen, just taking a guess at Mr Howard's habit.

Diligently, Mike pressed on and tried to fix his essay in places it sounded contrived rather than the contrition he had been aiming for. He knew he was going to have to throw in the Donovan fight for an example as to how taking the high road was always an option but a level of immaturity won out that day.

But boy did it make Mike feel *something* for a minute other than lost and despair.

Mike closed his eyes, digging the heels of his palms into his forehead as though to assuage the violent side of him.

She didn't have a problem with it. Eleven certainly never expressed great displeasure at his confession of his sudden spur of the moment violent streak. She barely reflected on it before showing him that dress, like she was trying to cheer him up. It worked and he understood her intention, the way only El could defer a difficult situation.

It made Mike realise that what he did that day to Donovan was an outlet for his emotions and a total fluke. But maybe the physical

expression had done something to shake up the universe in his favour, to show just how angry and how heartbroken he truly was.

Maybe feeling his pain to its very limit had shown the higher powers that it was time to give him and his friends a break. Will was certainly more appreciative of life once he had his hands on Eleven. Lucas and Dustin too very grateful for her return after three years of pure confusion and disappointment in themselves and the adults and the authorities they were meant to believe, meant to trust to do the right thing in the name of protecting their youth.

Mike had a sudden cloud of inspiration float into his brain as he decided to write this piece down that might make his essay a little more controversial, but he didn't expect it would throw his ass back in another detention if he argued it coherently and with some logic on hand.

After detailing this argument a little better, Mike stretched his body and cracked his back, flexing his hand in hopes it wouldn't cramp up or give him hell later on.

Just as he stretched his hand and ferociously shook it, his eyes landed on the window on the opposite side of the library, where a case of books just covered him, and something made him swallow pure fear down his throat, to be consumed by his now pummelling heart.

A smooth black van had pulled up to the school. A man wearing a trench coat and a suit with a pair of sturdy leather shoes got out the driver's side pulled open the van door. It revealed a few men, in similar coats and suits, some with sunglasses and overly neatened facial hair. But while all of that could have been explained, Mike knew the guns being locked and loaded couldn't.

He barely uttered a word before scrambled with the stuff he had on the table and throwing it into his backpack.

No Saturday detention was worth certain kidnapping or death.

---

"Why are we sitting like idiots here again?" Wilkins said roughly, as he sat in the rusted AMC Gremlin with his partner.



Sayer was too busy cleaning his gun out to answer him the way he would've wanted, and so shrugged. Wilkins took another bite out of his burger, courtesy of that joint that the CIA shot up three years ago, killing the namesake of the place. Pure shame too since the man clearly knew what he was doing with a greasy diner meal. He wiped his hands on his jeans and picked up his binoculars.

"I mean it's just a kid, it's not like he'll have what the experiment has," Wilkins says, before properly swallowing his burger down.

Sayer rolled his eyes. "MKUltra serum from the womb," he corrected his partner. "Did you listen to anything that Zemora said?"

"Surely there's a way to shorten that to a name?" Wilkins said, still looking through the binoculars in his surroundings.

Sayer had stopped cleaning and was reassembling his gun when he answered his query. "They called her Eleven, but Zemora hates when you use that term around her. Now could you finish up with that?"

Wilkins put his binoculars on his lap and looked at the burger and fries, nearly finished, but he was working on it, and he wouldn't be told when to damn well finish his food. "Why, don't want to stink out this shit box of a car with a decent smell?"

"We don't have a choice in vehicle, you know that," Sayer said sharply, clicking the now loaded gun into position. Wisely, he put the safety on before continuing on with Wilkins bullshit charade he did with everyone in the underground operation.

Wilkins took the hint, but it didn't sway him from talking. "It's not like anything big is going to happen. She's nowhere near this place if *she* is in fact out."

"She is," Sayer simply replied, "Otherwise Zemora wouldn't have us tailing the Wheeler boy."

"It's a hunch Sayer," Wilkins loudly moaned.

"A hunch from the Bureau of Meteorology and the CIA of strange activity happening in Hawkins - you think that shit's coincidental?" Sayer asked in true disbelief

"Whatever man," Wilkins retorted with ease, "I just think we should be prepared for the things that could come out of that strange activity, not a very likely *dead* girl," he finished in an all-knowing drawl.

Sayer scrunched up his face in bewilderment before shaking his head at his partner's attitude.

"You're such an asshole sometimes Wilkins."

"What, Zemora isn't here, there is no one else to be offended here but you," Wilkins pointed directly at him.

Wilkins proceeded to hitch his legs up in the car and put his hands behind his head. Sayer gave a long drawn out sigh, wishing he'd been assigned with absolutely anyone else in the operation. Wilkins finished his fries but was only over halfway through his burger. He eventually complained that it got cold. Sayer held back from calling him a stubborn idiot.

Sayer picked up the binoculars as Wilkins was too busy washing down his temperature ruined burger down his throat with the soda in the sole cup holder.

He had a fresh glance at the nearby surroundings and latched onto a new vehicle they had yet to witness near the school in their last week of scoping out the area.

A black van, shiny and new, and haphazardly pulling around the back of the school gets his attention and Sayer is practically punching Wilkins in the arm when he points out the van as it turns the corner of the school.

"Looks like we're no longer sitting pretty Wilkins. That kid is totally fucked if we don't get in there."

"Finally!" Wilkins throws the fast food bag to the floor and takes his ready gun from the compartment box.

They lock and load before getting out of the car, hoping this wouldn't completely fuck up.

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*Author's Note:*

*Hi folks.*

*This chapter was double the original length when planned but I figured it would kind of defeat the purpose of build up and pay off to have all of it in the same chapter so I decided to cut it and will edit certain stuff in future chapters to stick with a nice and neat 30 chapters.*

*If you want something to listen to while reading this, highly advise some David Bowie or Billy Idol, as well as Joy Division and definitely Peter Gabriel. Obviously anything 80's suits the theme.*

*I'm planning on using this next month that I have off from school to at least make it to Chapter 20 (hopefully Chapter 23) but I also need to socialise so I don't go insane lol.*

*Otherwise, this fic as a whole should hopefully be finished by the first of July (as I feel many people will be picking up their Stranger Things obsession and so it would be nice to have a complete work in the fandom because sometimes incomplete work gets overlooked - am I right tho?)*

*I'm not going to pin myself to that date because anything could happen in the next seven months, but I think if I do reach Chapter 20 before the 4th of Feb, then there's a good chance that I can edit and also finish the last ten chapters (the meatiest and most intense in some cases) by the time the third season comes out!*

*And possibly some one-shots to follow along.*

*I hope you enjoyed this chapter and what will come up soon! (Please review if you can, makes my heart swell and gives me a reason to live).*

*Fadinggx*